



AN ENGLISH ROSE

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CHAPTER I

THE departure platform at Charing Cross when the boat train is getting under way is always an interesting place, full of possibility and suggestion to the student of human nature. But, during the war, the scene has often been too poignant, causing the eyes to tingle even while the heart swells with pride over the quiet courage and tenacity of the British grit.

One morning quite early in the war, before ineffable longing for these tragedies to cease had become the dominant note, a little party gathered there whom the struggle was just getting in its grip.

Before it is all over will there be a household in the Empire which will not be in that grip? I trow not.

Among the early arrivals was a taxi-cab which had driven all the way from Streatham Hill and contained three people—a middle-aged woman and two girls.

"Don't you think you'd better get down at once, dear?" said Mrs. Marsham to the elder and plainer of her two daughters. "Such a string in front! You could be getting the tickets and seeing about seats."

"There's plenty of time, Mother," said Ann quietly, her small, dark, somewhat hatchet-looking face wearing its usual expression of resignation and philosophical endurance. "Besides, Cicely hasn't a lot of luggage, we can carry it all among us."

"We'll have to," said Cicely cheerfully, "When I came down to see Gwen Foley off we carried her

cabin trunk. It's jolly good exercise, too. It makes your complexion lovely. If the war doesn't hurry up a bit we shall be finding all sorts of new recipes for beauty, so that the beauty-parlours will be empty."

She needed no beauty-parlours nor artificial aids from any source whatsoever, being surely the fairest that e'er the sun shone on.

Two daughters of one race were Ann and Cicely Marsham, but there was no point of resemblance between them, though there was a very hearty affection. Ann, the sister whom Nature had not endowed with the gift of beauty, was singularly free from jealousy of her pretty sister, and even their mother's adoration of Cicely's looks and the too frequent allusion to them as a great family asset failed to rouse anything in Ann but a good-natured amusement. It was all such a game, and, standing on the outside, as it were, she was able to get the onlooker's full view.

Cicely wore nurse's uniform, and the demure little bonnet, with its enchanting bow under the dainty little chin, made her look like a picture. She was smiling, but her eyes were dancing with excitement as the heart of the young will dance even in war time when other hearts are heavily aching. And that is well, since without the gay and gallant smile of youth where would be our ship of State? Alas, heavily weighted, it might go to the bottom.

The mother was youthful-looking still, though about her eyes and mouth were the little lines telling of her worrying temperament.

"But you might be finding Aunt Georgie," she said, craning her neck from the window of the taxi, first forward and then backward.

"She isn't in front, nor behind, that I can see. Look out, Ann, your eyes are better than mine. Can you see Benthall? He's always a figure. I can't see how Aunt Georgie is going to do without him in the

war zone. He's such an important part of her entourage."

"Oh, he is only postponed, Mother," said Cicely cheerfully. "Aunt Georgie gets most things, and pretty soon I'm sure the august Benthall will be tearing along the French roads in all the majesty of a new uniform plus the red cross. Personally, I loathe the creature, he's eaten up with vanity. All Aunt Georgie's fault, of course. I hope they'll conscript him before the end of the war, then there'll be a new Benthall."

Cicely spoke gaily, and though her words were severe, there was not a trace of malice. Her nature was devoid of it. She was as sweet as she looked—a real English rose, to bloom for the brightening of a sad old world.

"What do you see, Ann? Sister Ann, Sister Ann, do you see anybody coming?"

"I think I see Benthall wearing an injured air indicating that he loathes being mixed up in a common crowd and having to wait his turn."

Mrs. Marsham immediately gripped her hand-bag and prepared to dismount, but Cicely restrained her.

"Mother, don't get out. You'll get knocked down, or lost, or something. You know what Aunt Georgie is when anything extra is on. Before she left Hans Crescent the whole household, if not on the doorstep, would be inside, driven to the edge of desperation. She hasn't had time to cool down yet, like we have, coming all the way from Stratham. Why shouldn't we all get down? Ann and I could easily carry everything between us. This awful thing is mounting steadily, six and eightpence—just the price of a lawyer's letter, isn't it?"

"Never mind. It is not every day a member of the family goes to France on war duty," said Mrs. Marsham with an air of motherly pride.

"I think Cis's suggestion is excellent, Mother. And if you'll take the dressing-case we can easily manage the box. It's so small and compact."

"Brainy kid!" laughed Cicely, and the next minute they were beginning to put the suggestion into execution.

When the reckoning was paid Mrs. Marsham left the girls to proceed to the platform, and, armed with Cicely's dressing-case and rug, made straight for her sister-in-law's car, from which that majestic being, apparently struck by the same idea, was already descending, leaving her maid Cheetham in charge of the luggage.

Her long cloak flew back as she stepped to the ground, displaying the large red cross prominent on her ample bosom. She was Roger Marsham's sister, and had known his wife in her girlhood, but they were neither friends nor yet amiable acquaintances.

All the Marshams were as poor as church mice, and realising quite early in her career that to marry money was her only chance, Georgie had done it. She had made an excellent choice in a rich city merchant, to whom in due course knighthood came as a natural right. She had never loved him, but she had had a happy life, and had made him happy, which was a great triumph. Love is the crown of life, undoubtedly, but it has thorns, and has to be paid for, coin by coin, till the measure is fully pressed down and running over.

The Winyards had trusted one another, and not demanding too much had lived placidly and understandingly together, and when Sir Richard died his widow had mourned him sincerely. He had left her a fortune and a beautiful house in Hans Crescent

A country place they had never possessed, though Lady Winyard, who had been brought up in a county family, greatly desired it. Her husband's tastes had

not run in that direction. He was London born, and country life did not attract him. She had been too wise to insist, though she told him frankly that if they had had any children she would have insisted.

"You don't understand, Dick," she told him. "In London you are only a number in a street, whatever your name is."

He had smiled at that—the indulgent smile of the man who listens respectfully to an adored woman's slightest word. But he did not believe what she said, or, to put it more correctly, he did not understand.

Lady Winyard, rich and unattached, had been busy on all sorts of war work in the seven months the war had lasted, and was now going out to the French Red Cross to run a private hospital for them, financing it from the foundation. She was taking her favourite niece with her as a nurse, and for the first time in their lives Ann envied her sister.

Lady Winyard had not been altogether disinterested in her invitation, because she was fully aware what an asset a charming young companion is to an elderly woman, and also, Cicely was an accomplished French scholar, having spent three years at a very select boarding school in the environs of Paris at her aunt's expense.

Though very glad to secure Cicely's services, Lady Winyard had, in conversation with her mother, laid some stress on the privilege conferred, explaining that she was overwhelmed by offers and requests from ladies of wealth and rank. "One Duchess Sara, one Viscountess, and dozens of others," she had said impressively to Mrs. Marsham, "all of them not only dying to come, but positively aching to pay their own way, share expenses, anything, to get out."

Mrs. Marsham listened politely, but afterwards declared stoutly to her husband that she didn't believe a word of it, and that it was just his sister's horrid

way of spoiling everything by her overweening patronage.

There was no trace of resentment in her face or manner, however, as she wriggled along between the waiting motors to Lady Winyard's car.

"Ah, there you are, dear Georgie!" she called out, her voice shrill with excitement. "We are just a little way in front. Can I do anything for you? It is really better to get out. The girls are seeing to everything. Good morning, Benthall! Good morning, Cheetham!" she said, including the maid and the chauffeur in one gracious bow. "Are you all going to France?"

"Benthall isn't," answered their mistress rather curtly. "I haven't got the permit for the car yet; but I hope it's coming later. Cheetham goes, of course. How do you suppose I could get along without her?"

Lady Winyard did not admire her brother's wife, and did not even credit her with brains. In her eyes she was a most insignificant, commonplace, dowdy little person, who wore her suburban clothes without the slightest distinction.

Lady Winyard herself was tall, and inclined to stoutness, which a clever dressmaker skilfully disguised. Even the straight lines of her uniform were so cleverly arranged that it had the effect of making her look almost slim.

The Marshams were not inclined to a generous habit of body, but Lady Winyard had lived long in the lap of luxury, and her table had always been noted for its lavishness. Her face at fifty-five was still fair and unlined, while her sister-in-law, who was three years younger, was thin and eager, with tell-tale lines here and there, and rather tired eyes.

Mrs. Marsham had had a very happy life so far as her family relations were concerned, but it had not been free from a great deal of acute anxiety of a sordid

kind. Her husband had not been able to remain on the family estate at Lesterford, and it had been all sold except the manor house itself, which, with fifty acres of park-like land—*vide* advertisement—had been let to a rich Jewish magnate. Through influence Mr. Marsham had sought and obtained a position in the Home Office; but it was an obscure position, bringing in a salary no more than sufficient to keep the house together.

For their three sons unheard-of sacrifices had been made, for the idea of depriving them of public-school education had not entered into their scheme of things. No Marsham had ever gone through life without a public-school education, therefore Roger Marsham's sons followed in the footsteps of their ancestors. Sometimes, however, knowing how hard is the struggle in the City, Roger Marsham had wondered whether it would not have been more politic to depart from immemorial custom and to have prepared them, frankly and efficiently, for business life.

These regrets the war had banished, however, for they were all in it. Roger, the eldest son, who had been in the Herts Yeomanry, had been mobilised on the first day of war; and the other two, Dick and Tony, had followed almost immediately.

Needless to say, Mrs. Marsham was immensely proud of her boys serving, and at the back of her mind really pitied her rich sister-in-law, who, having no immediate personal stake in the struggle, had to make a great fuss about her own little share.

Lady Winyard, who did not like waiting, decided to follow the example of her relatives in front and get out of the car.

"Can't I do anything, Georgie? The girls are in front. Cicely hasn't much luggage—would you like me to bring her to you?"

"No, no; but if you would go on ahead and see

about our tickets—'first' for me and 'second' for Cheetham—and send me a porter. There's a good creature!"

Mrs. Marsham swallowed the appellation, which she secretly resented, grasped the sheaf of notes thrust into her hand, and trotted off. In course of time all the preliminaries were got through. They passed the barrier and assembled on the platform beside the waiting train.

Cicely's watching eyes detected, at the farther end, her father's figure approaching, and flew to meet him. He was a tall, thin, slender person, shabbily dressed, but unmistakably a gentleman. His gentle, benignant expression won everybody with whom he came in contact, and he was a general favourite outside, and adored in his own home.

His expression was invariably a little sad, for he *had* given up much when the sacrifices of *Lesterford* became urgent. But he was no grinner, he made the best of everything, and left the grumbling to his wife, who was quite able to grumble for two. He had borne with her in saucy fashion, however, partly because he sympathised so keenly with her, realising that it is worse for a woman, country born and bred, to come out of a stately home to a small suburban house, and partly because it was his sweet nature to be tender and considerate to everybody, friend and foe alike. I use the word only relatively, because in all the world Roger Marsham had no enemy, and the very crossing-sweepers and the lift-boys wished him well and were the better for his smile.

"So you did manage to get leave, Daddy?" cried Cicely, as she folded her two clinging hands on his arm. "I've nothing left to wish for now—except that we were all going," she added; and her sweet lips trembled ever so slightly as she realised that the moment of real parting had come. "Everybody's up

here. Aunt Georgie's positively resplendent in her new uniform!"

They moved through the throng, and presently the brother and sister were greeting one another. They had not met for weeks, though Lady Winyard was very fond of him, and admired him immensely, though sorry he had been such a failure in life.

"I'm quite all right, thank you, Roger," she replied in answer to his question. "You want to say something to me? All right; come along. We've a good twenty minutes yet, so there is plenty of time."

"I'm glad I managed to get here in time. I wanted to see you, Georgie, to ask you to take special care of Cicely. I don't want anything to happen to her in France."

"What could possibly happen to her?" asked Lady Winyard in a slightly ironical voice. "We're not going anywhere near the firing-line. *Cœur la Reine* is at least thirty miles back."

"Battle lines have a habit of swinging to and fro," he reminded her. "And the Germans are making progress in France, worse luck. But it wasn't so much mere bodily danger I was thinking of as the other sort. She musn't get in with undesirables, Georgie. And, above all, please remember I don't want her to marry a Frenchman."

"Keep your mind at rest, Roger. What a worry you are! But I suppose you can't help it. I'll take care of the child all right. There aren't going to be any high jinks in my hospital, I tell you! I don't propose to be classed with Kitchener's plague of women after the war is over. I'm out to do a bit of real honest work, and I prefer to do it for France, because—well, perhaps you know why."

An extraordinary expression of softness swept across her hard face, and in a flash Roger Marsham understood, remembering the old love-affair between

his sister and a young attaché at the French Embassy in London that had occasioned so much heart-burning at Lesterford, and had been the theme of many family conclaves. It gave him a strange thrill, such as we all have felt when suddenly we behold unsuspected fires in the hearts of those with whom we have walked side by side, unknowing and unheeding, through grey, quiet years. He did not speak for a moment, and in that moment his sister's mood changed.

"I'll take care of her all right, and it is quite time she was taken from this impossible environment. I'd have offered to adopt her long ago, Roger, but I'm against it in principle. I've never had a child, but I've never been able to see the fairness of taking one out of a family and completely cutting that one off. It has to be complete and final, of course, or it is no good."

"You are right; it is worse than death. I'm glad you never asked it, Georgie. I'd certainly have refused."

"Poor old Roger! You've gone on steadily refusing most things that might have palliated your misfortunes. But I admire you for it, and I'm proud of the boys. You'll get credit with them, anyway, never fear. And you may leave Cicely to me."

They turned to thread their way back along the crowded platform to their own little group; and as Lady Winyard's eyes fell on Ann's inconspicuous figure, she said suddenly:

"What are you going to do with Ann, Roger? She has no looks, poor thing! I don't see that she has a chance, even in the war."

"Ann's all right; she'll find the way," said her father, without a trace of anxiety in his voice. All his concern at the moment was for his beautiful younger daughter; as a man of the world and a student of human nature, he knew that the woman dowered

with beauty, while she finds the world at-od, through is likewise liable to certain pitfalls, from which plainer sisters are exempt.

There was a good deal of chaff and happy nonsense talked in the next few minutes. It took the edge off the pain of parting, though there were many genuine tears shed as the packed train, with its load of pulsating humanity, moved out from grey old London. It marked the first stage of what was to prove an eventful journey to many—and the last for some.

It is very stale on the departure platform when the boat train moves out.

"I simply can't go home," said Mrs. Marsham discontentedly. "Can't you stop out and lunch with us somewhere, Roger—take us to your club, perhaps?"

"I can't possibly, dear. I had the greatest difficulty in getting out for an hour. We're so very short-handed."

"Then Ann and I will go west and have luncheon somewhere. We must do something to prevent us from loathing everything—including one another."

The little voyage to France was very familiar to Cicely Marsham; she had made it so often during her schooldays. They attracted considerable attention on the crowded boat. They were certainly very attractive specimens of British womanhood, and nobody had a doubt but that they were mother and daughter.

All sorts and conditions were represented on deck, but the Red Cross predominated so tremendously that it might quite properly have been labelled a Red Cross boat.

"I wonder where all these people are going, Cicely?" remarked Lady Winyard. "Weird specimens, some of them are! They can't, surely, all be going to hospitals in France."

"I see a good many different badges," observed Cicely.

Lady Winyard sniffed.

"Yes—on a good many able-bodied young men who ought to be wearing different clothes. But they'll all be taken, I'm sure, before the end. There's Cheetham rushing to the gangway, bowled over already! The Channel is a bit choppy this morning, but not out of the way for a March day."

Both Cicely and her aunt were good sailors. Lady Winyard had been twice round the world, and her husband had raced a yacht at Cowes, so the sea had no terrors for her. They were quite fresh when they arrived at Boulogne, and it was there that the car began to be actively missed.

They could not get on without several days' delay, as the railways were required first and foremost for troops; and as they were only part of a new Red Cross unit there, the authorities did not appear to consider their case one of extreme urgency.

Cicely enjoyed the few days at the Hotel Cambor, however, and Lady Winyard managed to hire a car, in which she drove to Wimereux and various other places where acquaintances or friends were helping in hospitals.

At last the eventful morning came when they were enabled to start out on the railway journey which would take them to their destination. It was only sixty-five miles, but it took them the better part of the day to get to the little wayside station of Fouches, which was the nearest point to the château of Cœur la Reine. It was the property of an old friend of Lady Winyard's, and had been compulsorily vacated in the earliest days of the war by the châtelaine, who was nursing at her town house in Paris. It had been presented to the Red Cross then, but had passed through many vicissitudes, had been once in German

occupation, and was now rather discredited, through mismanagement and mistakes of various kinds.

Some members of the old staff were still in residence, but there was a great lack of a capable managing head. After considerable correspondence with the French Red Cross authorities, Lady Winyard had offered to come and take entire charge and to finance it, provided she was allowed certain privileges in the matter of having her own friends with her. The only one she had brought, so far, was her niece, as she felt it necessary to see the place before she should enter on any final arrangements.

When the train drew up at the little wayside station, so typically French, with its little green *estaminet* covered with trellis and vine leaves, and guarded by a thin, small French soldier in the familiar red trousers and turned-back overcoat, Cicely felt her heart beat.

"It's like the back of beyond, Aunt Georgie. Do you think it can be the place?"

"I think it is. I made pretty drastic inquiries. Heavens! Are we supposed to be going to get into that awful fly-blown old chariot drawn by two mules? What is the distance to the château?" she asked the old, doddering object who seemed to be in charge of the whole depot.

"Only one kilometre, madam," was the answer; and thereafter she held her peace.

It was not possible to take anything in the curious little *fiacre* but their personal belongings, and Cicely had to explain to the old official that the heavy baggage must remain until arrangements could be made for sending down from the château for it. So they drove away in the still sunshine of that exquisite spring afternoon, through a peaceful and beautiful country apparently as yet untouched by war. But as they drove, the coachman explained in a few poignant sentences, how the Boches had actually passed that

way in their hurried first sweeping advance towards Paris, and had not wrought destruction only because they had not had time.

Through the stillness, however, more especially when the wind stirred in a certain direction, came the dull booming sound which those who have once heard it, even at a distance, can never again forget.

"I do believe I hear the guns, Aunt Georgie!" said Cicely, thrilling at the thought.

"Ask the driver," she suggested quickly.

Cicely put the question, and the answer came readily.

"Yes, mademoiselle, the guns beyond doubt. They seldom cease here now. When the wind rises the windows rattle, because the sound seems to come nearer. The children do not heed it—no. It only keeps the women awake. *C'est la guerre.*"

In many places women workers were busy in the fields. Nowhere was a man labourer, unless he was very old, to be seen. It was as if a strange blight had fallen on everything. Even though there were no signs of active desolation or destruction, it created a singular depression in the mind.

Both were glad when presently the driver turned once more on his box and pointed with his whip towards the broad sweep of woodland in the near distance.

"Le Bois de la Reine," he said. "And if the ladies would look a little to the left they would see the smoke from the château."

In twenty minutes from that moment they passed through the finely wrought gates, from which the Red Cross ensign flew.

It was a long and beautiful avenue leading into the heart of the Bois de la Reine, in which the château was completely hidden. It was found to stand on a slight eminence, however, when they came within

sight of it, and it had a noble terrace, with stone buttresses, running for several hundred yards in front. It was a beautiful specimen of Middle Age architecture, a typically noble house belonging to one of the old families.

Hundreds of such homes have fallen a prey to the invader, and his worst passions have often been wreaked on their defilement and final destruction.

"What a glorious place, Aunt Georgie! It does seem a shame that it should be a hospital! It looks as if kings and queens ought to inhabit it."

Lady Winyard was much pleased with her first view of the place, which far exceeded in beauty and importance the photographs she had seen of it. Presently they were at the front entrance, where they were received by the French matron and the military surgeon, who were in charge.

Lady Winyard was not lacking in dignity to meet this new situation, but she felt the lack of fluent French in the various interviews immediately following, and so did not let Cicely much out of her sight. At last, however, they were released from the formalities of their reception, and were conducted to the suite of rooms set apart for the visitors from England.

Cicely had quickly sensed that they were only in a moderate degree welcome, and that it would not be a very easy position to occupy for a time, at least, until they had got a thorough grip of the situation. She was enchanted with the place. At the back of the château there was a spacious courtyard, in which grew great chestnut trees, and where some extra and temporary buildings for the accommodation of the patients had been hastily erected. It rather spoiled the effect, but could not entirely destroy the old-world aspect of the place.

She washed her hands hastily, and went downstairs

to take a walk across the courtyard, and, if possible, to gain a little private impression of the actual work being carried on. She was not particularly drawn towards the few nurses she had seen, they did not appear to possess the qualities of the nurses to whom she had been accustomed, nor to belong to the same class. She had to remind herself that the nursing profession before the war was not so honoured in France as it is in England.

She looked into the new wards, but they were quite empty, and as she flitted quickly through one and came out by the other door she met an orderly in uniform full in the face.

He saluted and stood aside, and, much interested, Cicely took a second look at him. He did not look like a Frenchman. There was something definitely and typically British in the very way he stood at attention. He looked a gentleman, too, though his uniform left something to be desired in the way of fit and smartness.

"I believe you are English," she said, on the spur of the moment.

An expression of profound surprise crossed his rather dark, inscrutable-looking face.

"I do happen to be a British subject," he conceded. "But you are not the Lady Winyard who has been expected for so long?"

"Not exactly. I came with her, however, this very afternoon. How do you happen to be here as an orderly in a French hospital?"

He shrugged his shoulder.

"If you put a question in France to-day on any subject under heaven, there is but one answer. *C'est la guerre*. Will it suffice, mademoiselle?"

"My name is Marsham. To whom do I speak?" said Cicely, interested beyond belief in this extraordinary and quite unexpected happening.

"My name would not interest you much, I'm afraid. I'm only a servant here, and you are entitled to issue orders to me, and expect to be obeyed."

CHAPTER II

CICELY regarded him steadily for a moment. The musical notes of his pleasant though slightly muffled voice were those of an educated man. Apart from that, however, his appearance and personality were striking. He had a tall, gaunt figure, on which the uniform of the Red Cross hung loosely. His features, though slightly inclined to harshness, were regular; his forehead noble, his eyes of singular depth and softness. It would have been difficult to define his age, but Cicely noticed that his hair was slightly tinged with grey at the temples.

These are signs to appeal to the heart of a woman, and Cicely's heart was soft enough. She began to feel that *Cœur la Reine* might have tremendous possibilities, quite apart from the war.

"How do you, an English nursing sister, come here?" he asked, and his air was quite authoritative, though his voice was low—not at all the air one might expect in a hospital orderly.

"I'm not a sister at all—only a poor little V.A.D., who doesn't even feel at home in her uniform yet."

He glanced at her hands, and, though he said nothing, Cicely had the curious feeling that he was thinking of the ministry they might be called on to offer to the gallant sons of France who had spilled their blood freely and gladly for her defence and salvation.

"Lady Winyard happens to be my aunt, and she

brought me here because, I fancy, she thought my knowledge of French might be of use."

"Ah, you speak French?" he said, using the language with a perfect accent. "If you are ever so good as to speak to me, mademoiselle, let it be in French."

"But why? You are English, and we should do honour to our own tongue," said Cicely, on the spur of the moment. "French is beautiful, and I love it, but I have lots of sympathy with the enraged traveller who, when reproached with his ignorance of a certain foreign language, said there was only one language, and that it was the duty of the entire world to learn it. Of course, he meant English!"

A slight, dry smile relieved the gravity of the orderly's face.

"Where did you learn to speak such beautiful French, may I ask?" pursued Cicely, interested more and more. "Not in an English public school, I am sure."

"Heaven forbid! I'm not English—I'm Irish. My name is Kane."

"But surely Ireland is a part of the Empire, too?" said Cicely in a puzzled voice, recalling stories of patriots who, stung by the real or fancied wrongs of their unhappy country, had breathed forth threatenings against the hated English, who had played them false. He looked exactly like an Irish patriot; she immediately decided that he was one.

"I have lived several years in France. I happened to be in Paris when the war broke out, and I joined the Foreign Legion. I was wounded in their ranks, and came here for treatment. When I am fully recovered from my wound I'll go back."

"How thrilling! But why France, when there is England to fight for?" she asked, longing to probe beneath the surface and find some elucidation of an apparent mystery.

He looked away from her to where the chestnut buds were showing white and green against the background of the sky, and he had the expression of the man who evades the real issue.

"I owed a debt to France—and since we are allies, what's the odds?"

"You don't look in the least like an orderly," maintained Cicely frankly.

The stranger smiled then.

"Ah, mademoiselle, if misfortune makes people acquainted with strange bedfellows, it is certain that war works a thousand miracles each day that it is waged. I am not the only British subject here," he added, hesitating slightly on his choice of words. "There's a real Englishman here on whom you must exercise your persuasive arts. His name is Steering."

"But how extraordinary! It sounds like a little British colony in the heart of France. What is he doing here? Why isn't he in khaki?"

Kane shrugged his shoulders.

"That I can't tell you. But he is a person with a past—I could swear. Not that he has confided it to me, though we are very good comrades and work excellently together. We are united in our love for France and our unbounded admiration for the noble, self-sacrificing courage of her sons."

"You talk like a book," said Cicely, more touched than she cared to show. "Well, I must go now. I'm making a tour of inspection. I am something like a cat who goes to a new domicile—I must see every corner before I can settle down."

"With a broom to sweep it all very clean—in the English way," suggested the stranger, with a faint ironical smile. "But not, I hope, wholly oblivious of the distaste of those who are included in the sweeping-up process?"

"You talk in enigmas, but when we get to know

one another better I shan't permit you to do that, Mr. Kane," said Cicely, with a flash of her pretty eyes on his sombre face. "Who is this coming? Is it your comrade Mr. Steering? This is rather overwhelming for a send-off. How am I expected to address you and Mr. Steering?"

She asked this because she discerned, even at a casual glance, that Steering also was a gentleman, according to the standards of her world and class. No word has been more misused, and for that reason it has been repudiated by some who have given the matter thought, and who think the last syllable cannot be improved upon.

Steering, though the less commanding figure than the man to whom Cicely was speaking, had a certain grace and agileness which suggested public school games strenuously played, hard riding to hounds, all the virile sports of a race whose youthful training the war has justified.

He had a handsome, even a winning, face, very fair skinned, with light, rather shifty blue eyes, a small moustache, and a very mobile mouth. But the jaw lacked strength, and the keen observer would have been quick to detect a lack of moral fibre in the curves of the face. Cicely, however, saw nothing but the winning smile, and he came forward with a confident, dashing air which contrasted strongly with Kane's diffidence and somewhat deprecating speech. If only an hospital orderly, it was in part a masquerade, and Steering had the joyous confidence of the man whose position had at least been once assured, whatever it might be now.

A pretty face is ever a beacon for such as he, and the beautiful creature in nurse's garb drew him like a magnet. So far, one of his complaints regarding life at Cœur la Reine had been the age and unattractiveness of the staff.

There was just an instant's awkwardness as they stood together, a little triangle, all unconscious of how inextricably and strangely the threads of their lives were to be bound up before destiny had worked its will with them.

To Cicely the situation was intensely interesting. She was young and had a natural bent towards romance, and there was much dramatic possibility in this situation, which had suddenly changed the whole outlook for her. Kane, with a certain laboured courtesy, stepped into the breach.

"This is an English lady, Steering—just arrived, and much surprised to find us here, as you can see. Good afternoon, mademoiselle!" he added in French, and walked away with the final air of a man from whom nothing more can be expected or required.

Steering took off his cap with a sweep.

"By Jove, a—! this is a bit of all right!" he said, with his most youthful, joyous air. "Where have you sprung from, and when did you come?"

His manner was that of an equal, but before she answered he drew himself sharply together.

"Oh, I say, please excuse me! That's the worst of doing this sort of thing. A chap can't always remember his p's and q's. I haven't the right to ask these personal questions; but I'm jolly glad to see you, all the same. It's like a cup of cold water in a thirsty land! Have you seen the sisters here? Excellent creatures, but emphatically not chosen for their looks."

Cicely, though, perhaps, she ought to have resented the speech, could not repress a smile.

"I am sure they are all dears, and that the *poilus* love them. What I want to know is what you and the other man are doing here. He surprised me a little, but he looks as if he might have a very good reason."

"So he has—a regular bag of them. He's Irish, and he's been in Paris for years, nursing his grievances

against the English. One of the sort that stirs up strife—though he's a jolly good chap and I'm awfully fond of him. I believe in select circles he's called a patriot, though our Government has another name for them."

"How thrilling! Of course, he's a gentleman?"

"Of course. Got a place somewhere in the bogs of South Ireland. He talks of it sometimes, and you feel as if you were reading from the Bible. I think he's slightly touched myself, but you can't help liking him. What part of England do you hail from, if I may be so bold as to ask?"

"I? Oh, I'm a Cockney—I come from Streatham," answered Cicely on the spur of the moment.

"Shouldn't have thought it," he answered, with glib frankness which she perhaps ought to have resented, but could not. "You came, I suppose, with our new boss. Do you know her well? Is she likely to bring the deluge on poor happy-go-lucky Cœur la Reine?"

"She'll tidy it up," said Cicely, with a demure smile. "That's inevitable; it's in the English blood. But it will be properly done, and everybody will have what they want. There'll be no shortage of anything which a well-equipped hospital should have. She is rich and very generous."

"Oh, good! Kane and I have been through some of the worst days here, soon after the Germans had to evacuate a few miles to the rear. We expected to be burned out, but for some merciful reason were let alone. They said it was because the man in command had met and been impressed by the comtesse. Ever seen her? She was one of the beauties of the old *régime*."

"Never; but I've heard my aunt speak of her."

"Your aunt? You mean Lady Winyard?"

Cicely nodded.

"Tell me more about the hospital when the Germans were in occupation. It's thrilling!"

"The old general was a humane creature; he left us in peace. And when they had to go back, after the Marne, his orders about sparing Cœur la Reine were most explicit. We owe him something for that. Just here and there is found one who redeems the whole villainous mass. . . . Must you go, Miss Winyard?"

"My name is Marsham—and my aunt is beckoning to me from her window, so I must go. I haven't half finished my inspection, through these interruptions."

"There will be plenty of time to inspect before we get in another convoy. But it mightn't be very long now, as the fighting seems drifting this way again."

"I'm hoping we shall have some real work to do soon," said Cicely, with all the enthusiasm of the amateur. "But you haven't told me yet what part of England you belong to."

"Probably if you really live in Streatham, the name wouldn't convey much to you. It's only a little old-world English village, miles from anywhere."

"Then, if you won't tell me that, will you tell me why you aren't in khaki, fighting for your own country? You haven't Mr. Kane's excuse, for you *are* an Englishman."

"Yes, I am. I'd like to hear what Kane really did tell you about himself."

"He told me he had been fighting in the ranks of the Foreign Legion."

"So he did tell you that! Well—so have I."

"You were in the Foreign Legion, too!" said Cicely, with a puzzled air. "I've read about it. I thought it was only all sorts of desperadoes who joined that regiment."

"There *are* some desperadoes, and some who have a quarrel with fate. Let it stand at that, Sister. There are some things that don't bear too close inspection. Kane and I have been soldiers of fortune together for the better part of a year."

"You knew him in Paris, too?"

"Yes, I knew him in Paris. We joined up together."

"It's quite thrilling—like something out of a book!" said the girl simply. "Oh, I am so glad I came! It's going to be more interesting than I expected even. It is like discovering that the things one has read in books are coming true. There is my aunt knocking violently on the window-pane, so I must go. Good-bye, Mr. Steering! I expect we shall get a chance of talking together again."

"I'll see to that," answered Steering, but so low that Cicely did not catch the words as she flitted away, her white skirt showing exquisitely against the gay spring blossoms in the flower beds.

"Cicely, wherever have you been? And he dared you stand talking to those orderlies so long? Remember you are in France," said Lady Winyard severely, when her pretty niece burst into the room. She was not really very conventional, but she was cross, and tired with her journey, and discouraged by the difficulties she had already encountered in her talk with the matron and the principal surgeon, neither of whom she had found so amenable as she expected.

"Oh, but Aunt Georgie, I've thrilling things to tell you! They're Englishmen—at least, one is Irish, and both are gentlemen. And they've been soldiers in the Foreign Legion, and have actually been wounded, though I didn't ask where."

"If they are English they have no business here," snapped Lady Winyard. "They ought to be in proper khaki, fighting in decent company. I forbid you to loiter about talking to them. I shall make a point of interviewing them myself, and trying to show them their duty."

It was Lady Winyard in her loftiest, most English mood.

"You won't find them very amenable, I'm afraid, Aunt Georgie. They've lived hard, anyone can see; and Kane has estates in Ireland, and thinks England has betrayed his country. Have you any tea? I'm simply *dying* for some."

"I believe Cheetham is making it. But she has begun to grumble already, and she may easily find herself back in England, and out of a situation without references, if she doesn't behave herself."

"Poor Cheetham! But she'll get interested soon, I'm sure, and then she will be invaluable. I'm so awfully grateful to you for fetching me here, Aunt Georgie. It's going to be ever so much more thrilling than any mere base hospital far from our lines. Why, *anything* might happen here!"

It might—even German reoccupation. I've just had my blood curdled by some of the tales the surgeon and matron have been telling me. I've come to the conclusion that they were trying to frighten me. Of course, the French don't really want us mixed up in this business, Cicely. They're jealous to their very backbones, and if they could have fought it out themselves they would have done. I could feel the covert hostility under their suave manners, and I wanted you there, to listen and to help me out. They talk so fast one only gets a mere impression—never full facts—from them."

"I'm so sorry, Aunt Georgie. I didn't think you would be getting to business quite so soon. But isn't it a heavenly old house? If it were mine, how I should hate having it all muddled up like this! And those horrid tin buildings in that sweet mediæval courtyard! If we are not going to be very busy, couldn't you suggest having them taken down?"

"No, my dear, I couldn't. It isn't my house; and if Yvonne Biancourt doesn't mind *hencoops* in her ancestral courtyard, we needn't trouble about

them. But, Cicely—they don't begin to have an idea of what real hygienic conditions are! What I should like to do is to pull down the inside of this house and install a proper system of ventilation and sanitation."

"It dates from the Middle Ages, Auntie. I suppose people didn't need these things then; they are the product of super-civilisation."

"I won't rest, anyhow, till I get an English surgeon out to help me combat their archaic ideas. I mean to have results here, Cicely—the best results obtainable in hospital records."

"I foresee a good deal of friction in the process, Aunt Georgie. It does seem a pity to diminish the mediæval repose of *Cœur la Reine*. I wonder how the château got that charming name? It simply reeks with romance!"

"You are a silly child, Cicely, and I see I'll have to keep you up to the mark."

"Oh, no, Aunt Georgie, I hope not. I shall really do my duty, and work very hard. But you can't deny it's all thrilling. I don't feel a real person any more. And, oh, where is Streatham Hill? I am sure I never can have lived there! It's all just like a dream!"

CHAPTER III

"AUNTIE, I don't think I'll go down to Boulogne with you to-day," said Cicely, coming into her aunt's room at the hospital one morning, about two months after they had been established at *Cœur la Reine*.

Lady Winyard turned round and looked attentively at her niece.

"Anything the matter, child? Don't you feel well?"

"Quite well—only I feel as if I wanted to stay at home to-day. You don't mind, do you? And you'll be back to-morrow."

The journey was for the purpose of meeting the car, which had come over from England at last, in charge of Benthall, having been properly accredited for Red Cross service in the war zone.

"I *am* surprised! I thought you were dying for a trip to Boulogne. But are you happy here, Cicely?"

"Yes; it's tremendously interesting. And matron says we are certain to have a big convoy this week, as the fighting is swaying this way again."

"It won't arrive before I get back," said Lady Winyard, as Chettham helped her into the luxurious fur coat, which covered up most of the uniform. "Can I bring you anything from Boulogne?"

"Hairpins, Auntie. And some new stockings—they do wear out, rushing up and down these stairs. And some writing-pads for the men, if you can think of them. I've just jotted down a few things on this piece of paper for you."

"All right, my dear. I hope I'll come across a few acquaintances; and if I've time I'll take a run out to Wimereux, and compare notes on hospital management with Adela Moreton. Good-bye!"

"I'll come to the station with you, I think, Auntie, and walk back. There is a freshness in the air to-day, and that sickly heat has gone."

Taking even a little journey by rail in France in war-time entails a considerable drain upon patience. They sat an hour and a quarter on the unshaded platform before the long train, which had come from Amiens, rolled slowly into the station. It was packed, mostly with officers and a few soldiers; there were not many civilian passengers.



AN ENGLISH ROSE

Cicely was much admired by many eyes that looked out at the little wayside station, surprised to see there an English rose. She waved her hand to her aunt until the train was out of sight, then sauntered out to the little shop in the village street to buy a few chocolates. When she came out again she encountered Kane, the orderly, who lifted his cap and said he wanted to buy cigarettes.

"Hurry up, and I'll wait for you. Been seeing my aunt off to Boulogne. We've sat at this station exactly one hour and twenty minutes, and every scrap of *déjeuner* will have disappeared when we get back. Perhaps you've had yours?"

"I have. And a message has just come through that we may expect a big convoy about six this evening. The fighting in the Arias district has been frightful, and every inch of available accommodation is wanted."

"And Auntie just gone!" said Cicely; and her face flushed a little at the prospect.

She had not yet got used to the sight of suffering. The arrival of the first convoy of heroes who had spilled their blood for France had given her a great shock. But it had not impaired her usefulness, and she had been complimented by the surgeons on her endurance, courage and real skill in obeying orders.

The arrival of the convoys, indeed, tested the fibre of all sorts and conditions. Cicely had been much interested watching the orderlies at their work, and in noting the difference between the two English-speaking ones—Kane and Steering—and their French comrades.

Kane interested her the more. He was so strong and yet so tender; his harsh face softened into inexpressible tenderness as he handled the poor, broken men. Steering, though not less kind, was more casual, and hid his feelings under the guise of indifference and a kind of nonchalance which deceived Cicely into

thinking him rather heartless. She had had a good deal of talk with Steering, in spite of Lady Winyard's oft-repeated injunctions.

Cicely managed to have a good time among them all. Youth will be served, and she was perfectly well aware that both these men admired her. Steering frankly did; but about the strong, silent one, whom she had christened the "Mystery Man," she was not so sure. Sometimes he would respond eagerly to her friendly greeting, with a sombre kindling in his eyes; at other times he avoided her most pointedly, and was even surly when she spoke. She had learned no further particulars about the intimate or family life of these men, and had adhered to her first impression that Steering was a ne'er-do-well younger son, whom his people had only been too glad to get rid of.

Steering, on his part, believed her to be the adopted daughter of the rich Lady Winyard, and heiress to her large fortune. He had obtained some information from Cheetham, to whom he had rendered several small services, after listening patiently to her abuse of France, and of the life the vagaries of her employer compelled her to lead.

Cheetham was a Londoner of Londoners, and admitted no good thing beyond its confines.

There was something sunshiny and enchanting about the girl whom the *poilus* had christened the "English Rose." None was more conscious of it than Dennis Kane, and the sombre light was very evident in his eyes as he quickly rejoined her on the sunny cobbles of the street.

"What an immense parcel! Are you going to smoke all these—in war-time, too?" she asked, glancing at the bulky package in his right hand.

"I'm not. But they *will* be smoked—by the poor beggars who are coming in to-night. They are so plucky, and nothing helps them better than a smoke.

Last convoy we had the stock ran out. I'm taking no risks. I had sent to London for ten thousand, but they haven't arrived yet."

"It's very good of you," said Cicely, sending him a swift glance of appreciation and approval. "I must tell you how splendid I think you are with the men. Last convoy we had in—I was watching you at the door—it nearly made me cry to see you so tender with them."

He made no answer, but turned his face away.

"I owe them more than I can ever repay. You are not disappointed with France in war-time, then?"

"Disappointed? No! It is the most wonderful experience, this! It makes me weep half the time; but that I don't mind, and I'm getting to be quite a good nurse. M. Lemoine complimented me only yesterday."

"I'm not surprised. But there is nothing you could not do," observed Kane simply.

Cicely flushed at this, what she considered, outrageous compliment. Steering often spoke like that, but it had no effect on her. But Kane spoke so little, and was so seldom personal, that such words from him meant much.

"I didn't think you noticed," she said, with a faint touch of coquetry which sat adorably upon her.

"One does not seem to notice the sun, but one feels it all the same," he said. Then, "Are you likely to stay here indefinitely?"

"As long as my aunt remains—I hope and expect."

"I am leaving on the first of May."

"But why?"

"Because I am perfectly well again, and will go back to the Legion."

"The Foreign Legion!" she said, with a strange thrill in her voice. "And you never told me how seriously you had been wounded. It was M. Lemoine told me."

"It was no one's concern but my own, surely."

"You were once a patient in Cœur la Reine, of course?"

"Yes; and my wound was tiresome. I was only yesterday passed fit for service again, and I will re-join, as I say, in ten days' time."

"Do you mind?"

"Mind? No; I am glad. It is what I live for—to fight for France, to help forward the crusade against tyranny and wrong. When this war is over, Miss Marsham, England will be better; she will rise to her high destiny, and do justice within her own gates. I shall not live to see it, but it will come."

"Why do you say that? If you think you are going to be killed, don't go back to the Foreign Legion, but return to England and join some other regiment. It is true what they say, is it not, that they put the Legion into all the desperate positions to lead forlorn hopes, to storm impossible citadels?"

"It has done its share, and I will stay with it to the end," he said quietly. "I may remember, perhaps, that you were interested enough to suggest that I should not court death."

"Court death? Why, of course, nobody but a fool does that!" cried Cicely, surprised at her own heat. "And some day you'll get out of all this horrid gloom you love to revel in, and admit that life is quite good and the world not such a bad place, after all. That's my philosophy."

"There is a great gulf fixed. But you have a mission—to bloom for the benediction of the world."

Cicely laughed openly at that solemn compliment, though afterwards she recalled it with a strange sense of longing.

About six that evening the rumble of endless wagons on the long drive announced the arrival of the convoy.

It was a very large one, which would tax the resources of the hospital to the utmost. But they were equal to it. Lady Winyard had not allowed the grass to grow under her feet. No expense, no personal trouble and no labour had been spared to ensure the comfort and efficiency of the hospital.

Lady Winyard had brought all her powers to bear on the reorganisation, and already had left her mark on it.

The whole evening was taken up receiving the patients, and far into the night the work of examination was continued. Every wound had to be carefully examined; in many cases immediate operation was necessary; and the entire staff was working at fever-heat into the early hours of the following morning.

Cicely was here, there and everywhere, bravely hiding the pain and revolt she felt against the heavy and cruel harvest of war; and about four o'clock in the morning, when the new dawn was creeping exquisitely over the waking world, M. Lemoine noted her wan looks, and promptly ordered her off to bed.

She slept fitfully, for the sun was up by the time she got into bed and would creep through the shutters. Also, her nerves were all on edge, and she cried a good deal in sympathy with all the pain she had been witness to, not yet hardened to handling it without a pang. When she awoke fully the day was young still, but, feeling quite rested, she got up and began to dress.

In less than half an hour she was out of doors, longing to get away from the all-pervading fumes of ether and iodine, and to feel the kindly benison of the sun on her head. She stole out by the back entrance, and entered the wood known as Le Bois de la Reine.

It was a remnant of what had once been one of the noblest forests in Northern France, the greater area of which had been destroyed, not by vandals or invader,

but by wise legislators, in order that there might be more rich soil for the cultivation of the people's food. The consequence was that that province was noted as one of the finest agricultural portions of Northern France. The richness of the compost in the woods, incorporated with the soil, had rendered it so fertile as to require no artificial dressing for many years.

A few fields immediately adjoining the park surrounding the château had been reserved for cultivation for the household, and since it had been converted into a hospital were kept in order by such casual labour as the hospital could provide.

Able-bodied peasants there were now none in the village or district, and the land was worked exclusively by very old men and a few women.

Cicely had often seen members of the hospital staff, and wounded soldiers able for a little light exercise, at work in the fields. She was therefore not in the least surprised, as she emerged from the shadow of the trees, leaving the sweet-scented pine paths, flanked by the stars of anemone and primrose, behind her, to behold a solitary figure in uniform handling a hoe.

A nearer glance discovered Steering to her, and he appeared to be quite alone. The moment he saw her he ceased work, shouldered his implement, and strode across the furrows.

Although feeling a little sad and very tired, she was ready with a word of jesting reproof.

"Go back to your furrow, Pierre, or I shall report you!"

He smiled at that, at the same time eyeing her keenly, noting the extreme paleness of her face.

"You're dead beat," he said curtly. "You ought to be lying down, after the splendid work you did all last night."

"How do you know it was splendid?" she asked, finding his praise of her work sweet.

"I saw it. I'm not an expert, but certain things are obvious. Besides, I heard Maître Lemoine complimenting you—and, incidentally, I wanted to punch his head."

"A very wrong desire to inspire the breast of an orderly!" she said demurely, and at the same time handed him the little posy of the star-like blossoms of the anemone she had stooped to pick under the shade of the trees.

She was surprised when he put them to his lips, and a little disquieted. Almost she felt inclined to step back into the cool spaces of the wood again, afraid lest foolish words might follow a betraying act.

"An orderly may be a man, I suppose," he said gruffly. "I suppose if friend Kane had said that you wouldn't have rebuked him."

In spite of her efforts to keep perfectly unconscious, Cicely's colour rose.

"I'll take back my flowers, if you please. Yes, really—you don't deserve them. I haven't given you any right—have I?—to make personal remarks. Aunt Georgie was quite right, after all. She always is—worse luck!" she added, with a delicious lapse into complete girlish naturalness and comradeship with an equal whom she rather liked. "My aunt always is right—more especially about all the things one does and ought not."

"Lady Winyard has barred the orderlies, then?" asked Steering, as he pushed his cap back on his head, revealing the white line beyond it where the sun had not touched.

"Oh, absolutely! Ages back—when we came first. But though I'm her niece, I'm not exactly under orders, as I explained one day. I'm really twenty-two, and accountable to nobody but myself."

"Twenty-two is a great, a marvellous age. I'm thirty-two myself, and feel as old as Methuselah. Say,

Sister, has old Dennis told you we're both going back to the Legion next week?"

"He told me yesterday he was going. He didn't take your name in vain. And I must say to you what I said to him. Why the Legion? Do, for goodness' sake, report yourself to the nearest British base, and fight beside your own brothers!"

He shook his head.

"It isn't worth while now. Besides," he added, and an odd softness crossed his handsome face, blotting out some of the hard lines the way in the wilderness had brought there, "you've seen something of them now—these plucky little *poules*. Aren't they worth fighting not only beside, but for, when necessity arises?"

Cicely bowed her head at this unexpected tribute, and something misty blurred her eyes, and for a moment the sunny landscape was dimmed.

Before they could speak again the whirl of something in the sky attracted them, and they both looked up hastily, to behold an aeroplane in the high distance, riding steadily, like some great bird, against the clear stillness of the upper air.

"They've been a lot over here lately," said Steering. "Dennis and I counted five one day last week. Reconnaissance, of course, but it's my belief Cœur la Reine will be shelled presently. We're just a target after the Boche's heart."

"Perhaps it's a friendly one. Do you know the difference?" asked Cicely, and stepped forward a little in the soft brown earth to get a better view.

Then the machine swooped with a movement of incredible skill and speed, and the next thing something shot down through the spring-scented air, and she remembered no more.

When she came to herself she was lying on her bed in her own room, still fully dressed, and one of

the doctors, with a sister on each side, bending anxiously over her. She smiled faintly as she opened her eyes.

"Where am I? Oh, yes—bombs, or something, came out of the flying machine. What happened to Steering? Was he hurt?"

"Yes, mademoiselle—rather seriously. We are thankful to see that you are little the worse. Do you think you might try to get up for a second or so, just to make sure?"

"Oh, certainly. I don't think I'm hurt. I suppose I must have fainted. Did I faint? If I did I'm ashamed, for I wasn't in the least afraid."

"You didn't faint, I think, mademoiselle—though to have done so in such circumstances surely augured nothing but womanly charm," said the little doctor in his precise, book-like phrase. "Shell-shock in a mild form you suffer from, and we hope that after you have rested in bed for twenty-four hours you will be all right."

"Twenty-four hours? Oh, nonsense! I'm going to get up now. But do tell me about poor Steering. Is he actually hurt?"

"Seriously, mademoiselle. At the moment he is in the hands of M. Lemoine."

"Oh!" said Cicely, with a little groan. "I am so sorry. Perhaps he will never go back to the Legion now. Is that you, Cheetham? Do come in, and don't look as if you were scared to death!"

The remark was quite justified, for Cheetham *was* scared, and only her devotion to a generous and very compelling mistress had kept her all these weeks at the hospital.

"Oh, Miss Cicely—and 'er ladyship not 'ere! Whatever will she say? It's this heathen country. It isn't really safe for people like us."

"Poor Cheetham! What have we done to claim

complete safety? We're all at war, aren't we ^{thing} from me a basin of cold water, there's a dear; and w ^{re} I've washed I'll get up. I feel dirty—and just look at my frock!"

"I suppose whatever they threw out at you and that poor Mr. Steering sent all the earth flying over you. The noise was something awful, miss! Oh, I don't like this war business—not so close, that is. What with guns keeping one awake all night, and now shells flying by day, it isn't at all safe."

In ordinary times Cicely would have loved a banter with poor Cheetham on such a subject, but her thoughts were too serious. She realised that she had had a narrow escape from death, and the grave face of the little doctor indicated that small hope of Steering's recovery was entertained.

She asked several times in the course of the afternoon whether she could see him, but was invariably refused. The message came back that he was still unconscious and very low.

About six o'clock, while she was resting on the sofa in her aunt's sitting-room, quite conscious that she had had a considerable shock, and did not particularly desire to walk about or go up and down stairs, a knock came to the door, and, to her surprise, M. Lemoine, the great surgeon, appeared on the threshold.

"I know," she cried, jumping up, "you have come to tell me that poor Steering is dead, M. Lemoine!"

"Not yet, mademoiselle; but death is imminent. He desires very much to see you, but is not able to carry on a consecutive conversation. I have been with him for the last hour, and I am the bearer of a message to you, mademoiselle."

"Oh, but I feel I daren't see him! I'm so dreadfully sorry, for I feel, don't you know, that if I hadn't appeared on the scene when I did—he left his work

to come over and talk to me when I came out of the wood—he would not have been hurt at all. You see, he was quite two hundred yards away from where we were standing. Wouldn't that have saved him?"

"It might and it might not, mademoiselle. You see, there were splinters flying. We are thankful none of them found mark in you. Regrets are useless. Your Tommies say 'the number is up.' It is what Steering himself has said. But his message, mademoiselle. It is a strange one; but then, you English are a strange, though wholly admirable people."

"Yes, of course, deliver it—and please be quick," said Cicely, with an imperative air she would not have presumed on an ordinary occasion to display towards the great surgeon, who was the real head of Cœur la Reine.

"Steering is *in extremis*, mademoiselle, and he desires that you will consent to become his wife before the end."

Cicely stared in complete bewilderment.

"His wife? But why?" she asked stupidly.

The surgeon shrugged his white-coated shoulders and elevated his brows.

"Mademoiselle, it is obvious—it has been obvious to all of us for weeks. He is the most ardent, if not the only, worshipper of the sweet English Rose. But there is more than this. It seems that he has something to redeem—to make right—and in you he sees the instrument. I cannot urge or impress you, mademoiselle, but only suggest that it would make a dying man happy without injuring you."

"But supposing he did, by any chance, live—then don't you see I should be his wife?"

Once more the surgeon shrugged his shoulders. But he made no further remark; only stood silent, waiting with what patience he could for her decision.

"Is his great friend Kane with him, do you know?"

she asked. And if the surgeon gathered anything from her utterance of that name, he made no sign.

"He has never left him, mademoiselle. They are as brothers."

"And does he—does he know of this extraordinary request?"

"He heard him make it. In fact, mademoiselle, Steering wished him to be his emissary; but he refused, and suggested your humble servant."

"Does Kane think I should accede to a request so extraordinary?"

"He did not say, mademoiselle. But as I say, they are brothers in heart, and he would fain see him die in peace.

"You think he *will* die?"

"There is nothing more sure, mademoiselle. Almost every vital organ is injured. It was impossible to do anything except relieve."

Cicely bit her lips, and her young face worked strangely.

"Come back to me in a quarter of an hour's time, please," she said, and dismissed him from her presence.

CHAPTER IV

ONCE or twice in most lives comes a supreme moment when its possessor has to stand at the parting of the ways.

When M. Lemoine left her room Cicely stood at the window, looking out upon the sweet green stealing like a mist over the tree tops in the Bois de la

Reine, and her young face wore a very solemn look. Only a few short weeks had elapsed since she had left her commonplace and rather dull English home, and lo! she was face to face with a desperate issue which she, and she alone, must decide.

Fate had willed it so, for even her aunt, whose practical brain generally saw through difficulties and forthwith surmounted them, was out of touch or reach. Something was borne in upon the girl that her aunt's absence might be part of some great, inscrutable plan regarding the fabric of her life.

This great issue, which must make a difference so tremendous in her life, had to be decided here and now by her alone. She knew, even as the whirl of thought chased through her excited brain, that it was being decided—that some mysterious power greater than she had decided it for her. Quickly Cicely prayed, in very simple, pathetic phrase: "O Lord, if you want me to do this, show me quite plainly, for Jesus' sake."

Her look was lofty, though there was a suspicion of tears in her eyes, when at the end of fifteen minutes, which seemed like one, the surgeon's knock came to the door.

"The matter is urgent, mademoiselle. Will you come—or not?" he added more slowly; then, seeing the expression on her face, held open wide the door.

They passed out into the corridor, down the steep stairs, across the wide hall to the dining-hall—the only place empty at the moment—where, on a hastily improvised bed, lay poor Steering. Kane was kneeling by his bed at one side; at the other, one of the ward sisters; and in the background Cicely shrank a little at sight of M. de Cassanet, the parish priest, a saintly-looking old man, whom already she knew well and had learned to love—he was so sweet with the old and with the little children. In one of her odd leisure moments Cicely had made a little sketch of him blessing the

children in the porch of the church of St. Antoine in the village.

Steering's head moved with the opening of the door, and when his eyes, which looked extraordinarily bright and restless, came in line with Cicely's face they brightened still more.

She stepped forward, for, seeing death in these eyes, all the trappings of life were suddenly dwarfed and swept into the background, and there was only the passing soul and the woman's heart whose calling it is to comfort and to heal.

"Can he speak?" she asked in a low whisper, and was surprised when Steering himself answered.

"Yes. Tell them to move back—leave us."

They moved with one accord to the farther end of the great refectory, and Cicely knelt by the bed.

He was greatly changed. Every trace of hardness had died out of his face; the marks of the wilderness had disappeared. His face looked oddly boyish and young, and there was a nobility which Cicely had never seen there before. It filled her with inexpressible sadness, because it revealed what had been lost and thrown away in a life which nature had destined for higher things.

"It is good of you to come; but you're a good plucky one," he said quite clearly. "Will you do what I ask?"

"I'm not sure," said Cicely, as she bent over him. "It's a big thing to ask. If you could tell me why you ask it——"

"It would take too long. There isn't time, nor strength. But it won't hurt anybody, and it will help some. It—it will atone."

"And supposing you get better, after all?" she suggested, for the thought was insistently uppermost in her mind. "You might, you know. These miracles sometimes happen in this war of wars——"

"Hasn't Lemoine told you that my number is up?" he said.

"He has; but even great surgeons are powerless to prevent miracles."

"Ah, but I know it's only a question of minutes now. Tell the padre to come along. I rather wish he had been English; but we have to make shift in war-time, and he's a good old sort."

Cicely's face wore a very doubtful look. Her years at the Parisian school had made clear to her the national difference in law, creed, and procedure where marriage was concerned.

"Wait a moment; I must speak to Father de Cassanet."

The priest was waiting for her, as if fully prepared for certain questions she might ask.

"Mr. Steering has already spoken to you, Father," she said simply. "I am willing to marry him, as he so much desires, in order that he may die in peace. But for you to perform the ceremony, would it be legal?"

"No, mademoiselle; and though my heart is with you and with him, it would be impossible for me to do it. My sentence would be excommunication."

In spite of herself, Cicely heard the words with relief. Such a loophole provided at the last moment seemed both merciful and right.

"Will you go back and tell him, Father?" she said gently. "I do not feel that I can."

The priest, accustomed to the sad duties of his office, which had all been much accentuated by the horrors of war, did not shrink from his task. Cicely remained where he had left her, standing by one of the low, narrow windows, through which the warm summer air played upon her cheek. The intervening minutes seemed interminable, but at last the priest

came back, with a wonderful softness on his kind old face.

"Mademoiselle, he will take no denial. Someone must go to the nearest camp for one of your chaplains. I will myself go if our friend M. Voisin, the notary, will lend me his little runabout."

"But is it any use?" asked Cicely quickly. "What does M. Lemoine say? He told me some time ago that the end might come at any moment."

"Mademoiselle, when the mind and heart are set upon something, death has been known to wait," said the priest. "I will ask M. Lemoine definitely, if you will go back to the poor young man's bedside."

The priest had one idea, that it was a love-match, and he was anxious that every bar should be removed from the path of these two, to whom life had been cruel, and who would be immediately parted by death without tasting the joys of happy love.

Cicely, who had been strung up for immediate action, moved somewhat reluctantly up the refectory floor to Steering's side. He was waiting eagerly for her coming.

"Nuisance, isn't it, that the old padre can't do the job? The law's a 'hass' in France as well as in England," he added, with the same boyish air which seemed to wipe out the past. "But you'll wait, won't you? There's an English camp at Buschene; with luck the chaplain could be here inside an hour. The old padre has gone for him, hasn't he? He promised me he would go."

"He's consulting M. Lemoine at the moment, I believe."

"Oh, M. Lemoine be hanged! I tell you, my dear, I'll live to see this thing through if it should be days. It's got to be done, I tell you. I knew it the moment I set eyes on you—the first day you came to Cœur la Reine."

Cicely, feeling more and more the sport of circumstance, made no comment on this statement, but stepped back to see whether M. Lemoine had anything further to say. To her agitated inquiry he merely shook his head, and shrugged his shoulders in characteristic fashion.

"Mademoiselle, he ought to die now; but it is as the curé says—sometimes will can defy death for a space. We can but help to sustain him until he achieves his heart's desire."

Never as long as she lived could Cicely forget that hour of appalling strain. Imagine it! Small wonder that a vast pity for the girl overshadowed pity for the dying man in the hearts of the few spectators.

Cicely was thankful that Kane had disappeared. She felt that she could not have endured to discuss the matter with him.

Steering was still alive, and not perceptibly weaker, when, about an hour and a half later, the little run-about, driven with considerable skill by M. Voisin, the notary, came whirling up the avenue to the door of Cœur la Reine. The chaplain, in khaki, was by his side, and in a few moments those interested gathered again by the dying man's bedside. The padre was a very tall man, with a harsh, large-featured face, but a voice of surpassing sweetness, and a comforting way which made him beloved of all the boys he had in his care. He had high rank, and wore the ribbons of the Military Cross and the Croix de Guerre on his breast. He asked no questions, presumably because the situation had already been made fairly clear to him by those who had fetched him from the British camp, and also because his practised eye discerned that the end was near.

When he came to the question, "Who giveth this woman?" they looked round, rather at a loss. Answering the appeal in Steering's eyes, Kane stepped for-

ward, saying : "I do." So the service went on. When it was all over, and a few documents feebly signed, and a thin old ring belonging to one of the French sisters was on Cicely's bare left hand, they fell away from the bedside and left them alone together.

Cicely's hand remaining in Steering's grip, she felt it relax, and realised that the end was at hand.

"You feel happier?" she said anxiously. "I—I don't mind, though it has been rather awful. If you are happier—I don't mind."

"Yes, I'm happier, you sweet English rose ! How they'll love you at home ! Everything is all right—all quite right now. Will you—will you——"

Cicely understood, and, bending over him with a brave, womanly smile on her lips, kissed him twice.

Thus sweetly sped, the soul returned to the God Who gave it.

She was kneeling by the bed, with a strange look of solemnity and awe on her face, when they came and took her away.

She could not go back to her room. She could not even bear their kindly ministrations. She felt hemmed in, desperate, and that she must have light, air and space—get out into the open—see the sweep of the beneficent sky and seek help from beyond it.

It was a strange experience for a young girl, a most poignant and amazing experience, such as must of necessity tinge the whole of her after life.

She sped across the bridge which spanned the moat and once more entered the Bois de la Reine, not of a set purpose, but merely following the usual impulse. It was the favourite direction, the favourite path of all the household, for they seldom sought to go outside the front gates unless business called them to the village.

She was not surprised to find Kane there, standing against a gate, looking into the field into which had

fallen the deadly bomb that had wrought so strange a cataclysm in three lives.

He seemed to divine her coming, though her light footfall gave forth no sound on the pine needles. His face had never looked harsher nor more grim, but it relaxed at the sight of hers, so small and white, suggesting the frail sweetness of the anemones she crushed unknowingly under her feet.

"He's—he's dead. And it is very awful, the thing I have done!" she said, with a sob in her voice. And he feared, looking at her swaying figure, that she might faint before him.

He put out one hand, steadied her, and drew her towards a fallen tree trunk, where he compelled her to sit, standing bareheaded before her.

"What do you suppose is the meaning of it?" she said, looking up at him. "You think out things—you are always thinking. And I have nobody to ask."

He shook his head, but seemed to look away beyond, into the very heart of things.

"You think it was strange, perhaps; but I seemed to have lost the power of thinking, even of decision, but was just being driven by some force I could not define or even imagine. Don't you believe these things happen?"

"That we are driven by blind force? No. If a man believed that he would end all."

"Then what *do* you believe?" she asked petulantly. "Don't you see I need somebody to help me? You knew him well, and surely you are the one for me to ask. I'm all alone here, and I've got to face things up. My aunt, for instance. What will she say to me when she comes back from Boulogne to-night or to-morrow? She will think I have gone out of my mind."

Then Kane said an odd thing, without the vestige of a smile.

"It does not matter what Lady Winyard thinks. She does not count."

"Doesn't she! I wish she could hear you. She counts in my life, anyway, for she has been most awfully good to me. And besides, she's responsible to my people, and this thing will have to be explained to them—to my mother, who will never, never understand it, if she lived a thousand years!"

"But no great harm has been done," suggested Kane in his inscrutable voice. "You have only taken a man's name. He has gone, and you are as you were."

"But perhaps it isn't even his real name. Don't you know? Hasn't he told you anything *at all* about his people?"

"It is his family name and title."

"And title?" repeated Cicely wonderingly. "Do you mean that he has a title? Or what *do* you mean?"

"I believe that he is Lord Steering; but no doubt all his papers and things will make it clear to you. You are entitled, now, to look into everything belonging to him."

"Oh, I should never feel I had that right!" cried the girl, shrinking back. "Lord Steering! Then I must be Lady Steering—of what—of where? It seems to grow—to grow desperately! I feel a little afraid of the future somehow."

"Don't be afraid. It is given to such as you to get through easily, and without hurt to yourself—only to others."

"You are hateful when you speak like that!" cried Cicely petulantly. "You don't know a thing about me, and speak exactly as if I were some silly butterfly who hadn't one serious thought. You needn't think *you've* got all the seriousness. And if I do laugh and smile a good lot, it's a better way of serving one's Maker than going about scowling as you do. I'd be ashamed to do it even if I *had* wrongs. I'll tell you

what I think, too, as I am trouncing you—wrongs can be made a lot worse by brooding on them. Half the time they are purely imagination, so there! I must go back and try and find out where I am."

Kane's face underwent an extraordinary change as he listened to these gallant and candid words. Cicely knew quite well that Dennis Kane was interested in her, that in happier circumstances perhaps that interest might have deepened into love. Nor did she deny to herself that she was both interested in and drawn to him, and that he had made a greater appeal to her than handsome, happy-go-lucky Steering, who had come to such a tragic end.

"Thank you very much," he said in a low, quiet voice. "I'll remember what you have said, and try to improve in the direction you indicate."

Cicely laughed at that.

"Now it is not Kane who is speaking, but some remote and very polite gentleman!" Suddenly she broke off at another tangent, dashing a stinging moisture from her pretty eyes. "Oh, how hateful we are, bickering like this, when poor Steering is lying dead back there! It just shows that neither of us can have any heart. I must go back. I suppose I shall have to find out whether there is anybody I ought to write to."

"He has a mother," said Kane. And Cicely stood still on the path and looked at him.

"A mother? What sort? Did he write to her?"

"Never. He told me he had broken her heart. But she was enshrined in his. It may be—it may be that he had some strange idea of wiping out the dark years that have gone before by making her a gift of you——"

"Oh, but how awful! I don't want to be mixed up with people I have never seen. A mother—and I'm his gift to her! It won't bear thinking of! Tell

me more, if you know it. Don't you think you ought to tell me without asking? It is only fair to a poor girl placed in a position like this. It is making me afraid."

"I don't know any more. He belongs to what you call the English aristocracy," he answered, and, in spite of his effort to hide it, his voice perceptibly hardened again. "He had most of their faults, and some of their few virtues. Let it stand at that. He was the product of his class and caste."

"I don't mind about that. It is just your revolutionary way of talking," said Cicely, with a return of her old spirit. "What more do you know about his people? Has he brothers or sisters?"

"No brothers. One or two sisters, I think. But the only one I have heard him speak of with any warmth was one called Joyce."

"I wonder whether I shall ever see them, and what will be the end of it all?" said the girl. "I expect I shall just go on here as I have been doing. I had better go back to the house, I think. I feel so strange—as if the war had suddenly come to an end for me."

"Probably it has—at least, the form of your service for your country is likely to be changed," said Kane.

She walked away slowly, not thinking much about the words, or the thoughts which had prompted them. She had enough of her own to occupy her.

She found herself an object of the most intense interest and curiosity to the household when she returned, and as she slowly ascended the broad, wide staircase she met M. de Cassanet, the priest, making his way down from one of the big wards on the first floor.

He paused, smiling on her with a kind of mournful but encouraging sweetness. The true inwardness of the ceremony of which he had been a spectator he did not understand. He still imagined it to be a not

unnatural culmination to a love story which the fortunes of war had cut short before it came to the full flower.

Many strange things he had seen in his quiet country parish since the early days of the war, when the invading hordes had marched through its peaceful glades, but he had never doubted the goodness of God nor the ultimate triumph of France.

"You have been out of doors, my child. You are wise. Mother Earth has a message for us when we are in the extremity of sorrow."

Cicely perceived that he was labouring under a misapprehension, and a sudden desire to ask his advice, and tell him the whole truth, rose insistently in her mind.

"Could you come upstairs, Father?" she asked. "If you have a few minutes to spare, I should like to speak to you."

He turned with her at once, and they traversed the long, wide corridor on the first landing, till they came to the comfortable room at the farther end Lady Winyard had set aside for her own use. She had made it very English in all its appointments, having sent to Waring's for a flowery chintz of rose and wistaria, and certain long, downy cushions to convert the somewhat stiff settees of the Empire period into more comfortable resting-places.

Cicely closed the door, asked the priest to sit down, and seated herself before him.

"Father de Cassanet, you do not understand the situation, I see."

"Perhaps not; but surely I understand that it is a sad and poignant one for one so young. The good God will heal your sorrow in time, and you will find solace in working for others, madame, as you have been doing so sweetly here."

She noticed the change in his mode of address, and a faint deepening of her colour followed it.

"Oh, but I feel I must explain. The poor man who has died was not a lover of mine at all. We only knew each other a little."

"Madame, you astound me! Beyond doubt he loved you truly and devotedly. It was not possible for him to hide it," said the priest, bewildered by these strange words.

"Well, perhaps he may have cared," said Cicely, faltering a little; "but I certainly did not. And I haven't the remotest idea yet why he wanted to marry me like that, at a moment's notice, when he was dying. Do you know anything about it?"

"No, madame. The only person who might know anything is M. Voisin, the notary. Perhaps you had better see him. He told me he had drawn up some papers for a young Englishman working here. Would you like me to send him to you to-day—now—when I go down to the village?"

"If you would, Father. Or could I not walk with you now?"

The priest hesitated.

"It would be better, I think, madame, if you permitted him to wait upon you. He need not be long, nor weary you after he comes. I will send him up. When do you expect Lady Winyard back from Boulogne?"

"To-night, perhaps, or quite early to-morrow. I can't imagine what she will say about it all. Poor Mr. Steering told you nothing, then?"

"No, madame. He was not of our faith. We had many friendly talks on the roads when we met; and truly I think that, whatever they may say, he had a good heart. There was more than met the eye under that somewhat casual exterior."

"Oh, he was quite a good sort, and I wish I knew why he left home, and what happened away back in England to drive him into the Foreign Legion. I think

I will walk with you to the village, and you will show me the notary's house. We can go partly through the woods, Father, and no one will see us. Come, let us go now. I am not in the least tired."

He could not well refuse her, and he saw that she was consumed with restlessness as with an inward fire.

They talked of many things as they walked together, under the budding trees, towards the sweet, quiet little hamlet near the station, and they were fortunate in finding the notary in his office, behind the green shutters which kept out the sun.

Father de Cassanet desired to leave her at the door—or, at least, after he had introduced her to the notary's presence—but she would not let him go. So they entered the little, stuffy, dark office together, where the notary, a small, slightly deformed man, was poring over some papers.

"This is the widow of the poor young Englishman who died at Cœur la Reine," said the priest; and the notary fairly started in surprise.

"You are talking of M. Steering?" he said in his queer, guttural voice.

"Yes. And I remembered that you told me you had transacted some business for him not long ago. Perhaps you may have something to explain to this lady, who has now the right to know the whole of his affairs."

The notary bowed low before the amazed girl, who felt precisely as if she were taking part in some altogether impossible play.

"I am more than surprised, madame; but now it makes many things clear to me. You have just arrived, possibly, from England, at the very moment when your poor husband needed you?"

More explanations were here necessary, since apparently the news of the strange death-bed marriage had

not yet reached the village. In a few well-chosen words the curé put his friend and neighbour in possession of the facts of the case.

"Ah, I see! It explains part, if not all, of the strange story," he said, looking with interest, which quite evidently deepened with every moment, at the face of the sweet young English girl who found herself in such a difficult situation.

"Let me explain, madame, as simply as it is in my power. You speak my language well? That is good, for my English is of the poorest. About a week ago the poor gentleman who has since been killed by those wretched Boches came to me, and we had a very exhaustive interview, in which he expressed himself as very anxious to make himself acquainted with the French law; and also whether any document, more especially a will, if drawn up properly in France, would be valid in England and affect English property.

"I gave him the benefit of my advice and knowledge, and he then instructed me to draw up a will leaving all he died possessed of to his wife!"

"His wife!" repeated Cicely in wide-eyed astonishment. "But he hadn't got one then."

"No; but he said he thought he would have one soon—and he did not sign the will until after the ceremony."

"I don't understand," said Cicely helplessly. "It sounds uncanny. Did he expect that he was going to be killed, and that he would get married on his death-bed?"

The notary shrugged his shoulders.

"Madame, it is impossible to know what he thought. I concluded that he was a little mad. But there was something most winning about him—and, anyhow, he paid good money, and I did what he asked."

"Explain it all properly," said Cicely quietly. "Do

I understand you to say that he drew up a will leaving everything to me, his wife, though I was not his wife then at all?"

The notary took his fat bunch of keys from his pocket, and fitted one in the heavy lid of the tall, upstanding bureau. From it he extracted a large document of quite the legal type, and opened it out.

"Two copies have had to be made, madame—one in English and one in French. Will you read the English one?"

"No. Please read out the French one to me. I feel quite like a person in a dream. I don't think any of this can be real, or that it is relating to me at all. First, please, M. Voisin, will you tell me one thing? What was his real name? Was it Steering?"

The notary turned back upon the first page of the document he held in his hand, and in his queer accent, which faltered on the unaccustomed and, to his thinking, uncouth names, made answer:

"Giles Henry Deverill Steering, Steering Hall, and Deverills, in the County of Hertfordshire, third Baron Deverill."

Cicely stared fixedly into the notary's queer, wrinkled little face. It seemed so strange and incredible. She felt that she was being made the sport of fate.

CHAPTER V

LADY WINYARD had immensely enjoyed her trip to Boulogne. She met many notable people, and some familiar ones at the Hotel Cambon, looked up everybody likely to be interesting and useful, and made a trip with Benthall in the car out to Wimereux, to see

the friend who was running her own private hospital on the French coast.

It was late afternoon of the second day before she felt at leisure to turn her face towards *Cœur la Reine*. She felt no shame at having the handsome and strapping Benthall on the chauffeur's seat, but considered that, in view of what she was doing, his absence from the Army was not only desirable, but nothing more than her due.

Compulsion had not yet come in, and the sleek Benthall—who wanted nothing less on earth than a fighting chance, yet desired to see a little of “the show,” as he facetiously called the war—was mightily well pleased with himself as he turned the bonnet of the car due north, with his lady beside him to act as guide on the road to Fouches.

Benthall was a type of a class whom the war was to prove and winnow; but his hour had not yet struck.

“I have such a queer feeling, Benthall,” said his lady, who was not above talking confidentially, within certain limits, to a servant so eminently devoted and satisfactory.

“Have you, my lady?” he asked solicitously.

“Yes, Benthall. I have the sort of feeling that things have been happening in my absence—a big convoy, probably. We’ve been threatened with it for some time—ever since the guns have been creeping nearer us.”

“Are they very near, my lady?” asked Benthall, with perhaps the slightest tinge of anxiety in his well-trained voice.

“About thirty miles now. When we came they were fifty. The battle front swings, you know, Benthall. Once our hospital was a German headquarters. That was before the Marne.”

“Yes, my lady. I hope they won’t come that way

again, and put your ladyship to inconvenience," he said fervently.

"Oh, no, it is not expected. You see, their whole plan has been upset, and all their objectives wiped out. If you read the papers intelligently, Benthall, you ought to know that."

"Yes, my lady; but geography is difficult—more especially in foreign countries. I never was much good at it, anyway, at school. They do keep some good roads here," he added, admiring the long stretch, glistening white, like a ribbon, in the sun, and as smooth and flat as a billiard-table.

"They are not so good near Fouches, where we are going. The transport in the early days hacked them up. Well, as I was saying, Benthall, I do have that queer feeling. I hope it doesn't mean that I have been badly wanted. It would be just like my luck!"

"I hope not, my lady," said Benthall, just swerving a little to get nearer the grateful shade provided by the straight lines of poplars standing like sentinels in the sun. "I should think they planted these trees, my lady, with a measuring-tape or a foot-rule, and I never did see anything so even."

"One gets rather tired of them. But you will like the hospital; it is beautiful. And Fouches such a pretty little village."

"Shall I have much driving to do, my lady—of wounded, for instance?"

"None at all. They come, poor dears, in ambulances, and sometimes by train. The car will be for my exclusive private use, just as it was before. We are miles from anywhere. Besides, one never knows in war-time. Emergencies arise. And it is a delightful run to the coast, where, thank goodness, there are always boats to convey one back to England."

In such desultory talk the miles were quickly and pleasantly covered, and about sundown the Daimler,

true to every test, rolled up, with a slow, smooth purr of satisfaction, to the front entrance of *Cœur la Reine*.

Benthall, critical, inclined to disparagement of everything French, owing to sundry snubs he had received both at the port and at the hotel, was agreeably surprised by the noble dignity of the old French château, and inwardly decided that it was "a bit of all right."

Cicely, writing to her father in her aunt's room, which was at the back of the house, with windows looking across the big, wide courtyard towards the woods, did not hear the car, nor any sound of arrival, till her aunt broke into the room.

"There you are, child!" she said, kissing her affectionately. "That's done—and most successfully. What a comfort to be in one's own car again! And Benthall is handsomer and more efficient than ever! I only hope he won't be bored here. Well, what has happened? Heavens, how washed out you look! They've told me on the stairs about the big convoy; but, of course, everything has settled down beautifully. Matron says there wasn't a single hitch, and that the unloading was a marvel of efficiency and speed, and that M. Lemoine had a good word for everybody. It seems to have taken it out of you, though."

"Oh, no, Aunt Georgie; I'm quite all right!" said Cicely rather weakly, for she suddenly realised that between her and her large, handsome, comfortable aunt there was a great gulf fixed.

Material things only now mattered to Lady Winyard; she had lost—if she had ever possessed—the capacity for suffering or deep feeling of any kind. While Cicely felt that she was standing on the brink of—nay, was in the grip of—poignant, almost unendurable things.

"Right! You look like a positive ghost, child!" said Lady Winyard testily.

She was really fond of her niece, and, though she was shallow natured, something warned her that her presentiment in the car had some foundation.

"Tell me instantly what has happened."

Cicely put up her left hand suddenly to her cheek, and Lady Winyard saw the quaint, little, old-fashioned circlet on her third finger.

"What's that?" she asked sharply, a sudden fear of she knew not what clutching at her heart.

"It's—it's my wedding ring, Aunt Georgie. That is what has happened to me while you have been away."

"Your what?" almost shrieked Lady Winyard. "You must be crazy! What pranks have you been up to?"

Disjointedly, in short, staccato sentences, Cicely put her aunt in possession of the astonishing facts. Long before she had ceased speaking the elder woman had sunk, helpless, on the stiff settee covered with English chintz, and her face was a study in expression.

"You—you married an orderly on his death-bed simply because he asked you, and you thought it would smooth his dying-pillow, as they say! Heavens on earth! How am I to answer for it to your father? He'll kill me for this!"

Cicely shrugged her shoulders.

"I'm just turned twenty-two, Aunt Georgie—of an age to please myself."

Lady Winyard snorted.

"Was there nobody to prevent this atrocious outrage being perpetrated in my absence? Where was Lemoine? I'll never forgive him for this! But the man is mad—quite mad! They all are! So must you be, Cicely, or you never would have done it. I'm beside myself. And to see you sitting there so

calmly, precisely as if nothing had happened! Don't you understand, you little fool? You've ruined your chances—and you, with your face, might have made a hundred choices!”

“Oh, Aunt Georgie, don't harp on that!” said Cicely, growing stronger and calmer as her aunt's serenity became more deranged. “It doesn't matter—he's dead, poor fellow.”

“Dead—dead! Thank goodness he is! He might have lived, though, don't you forget it. I've heard of such things happening, and then it was hell for one or other of them. These death-bed affairs are always one-sided. And Father de Cassanet advised it, too! Oh, the old wretch! I'll kill him for this. He abused his office. But it may not even be legal. The law of France is not English law. That's our loophole. We'll go back to Boulogne to-morrow, and take the very best advice we can get. General Borrowdale will help me. He dined with me at the hotel last night, and was most kind and friendly. But Paris would be better. I wonder how far it is to Paris, and whether Benthall could take us in the car? Have you any idea whether we should have to go too near the German lines to get to Paris, Cicely? It would never do to run any risks.”

“Dear Aunt Georgie, it is all quite in order, I assure you. And I don't think it is so awful as you expect. After all, it can't hurt me. And as for my prospects—I don't want to get married. I want to stop on here and help you. I simply love Cœur la Reine, and dear Fouches, and all the sweet, old, uncomplaining people.”

“Oh, but the war won't last for ever!” cried Lady Winyard, really distraught, leaning her head on her hand. “Of course, he was a gentleman—one could see that. I ought to have forbidden you to speak to these men. And yet I trusted you! I thought you

could be left to care for yourself. You have never been flighty, but very demure and quiet. Was he—was he, by any chance, a lover of yours, then, Cicely?”

“No—if you mean that we had a love affair, certainly not,” said Cicely. And her aunt noted the nice distinction which informed her that there had been love on the orderly’s side.

“Who is he, then? Did he ever tell you anything about his family or his people? Do you know anything about what you have let yourself in for?”

Cicely, in spite of the acute strain of the situation, could not repress a faint smile as she prepared to reply. She knew her aunt so well, and that a change would come over the spirit of her dream, probably, when she heard the identity of the man who, in her present estimation, had so greatly presumed.

“Tell me quickly, and don’t sit there smiling in that aggravating manner. Just think how awful I feel! It is I who will have to bear the brunt of this. Your father will never forgive me.”

“I don’t think you need trouble about that, Auntie. It had nothing to do with you. I went into it with my eyes open, after considering it for fifteen minutes. That was all the time M. Lemoine would allow me.”

“I felt certain it was Lemoine! Oh, I shall certainly kill him!” cried Lady Winyard, as she stamped her daintily shod foot.

“No, no, Auntie. He did not speak a word, good or bad, to influence me. Nobody did. I just simply knew it was the thing I had to do. But it isn’t so bad, after all, from the point of view which I know is worrying you most. He was plain Steering, Aunt Georgie, but his real name is Lord Steering; and his place—or places—he seems to have strings of them—are in Hertfordshire. Have you ever heard of Steering Hall and Deverills?”

Lady Winyard stared, partly aghast, wholly un-

credulous. What she heard sounded so altogether impossible and improbable that she wondered whether she had left a sane hospital to return to one in the possession of lunatics.

"Steering! Deverills! Why, yes, I've seen the places. They are not on our side of the county. But, of course, they're in Debrett. I suppose it wouldn't be possible to get a Debrett in the war zone? I remember now—a Deverill married a Steering somewhere in the last century, and the estates were amalgamated. Why, then, it might have been worse!"

Her plump white hands, of which she took such exceeding care, and which she thought were improved by the banishment of gems from her fingers, folded themselves, with a little complacent pat, on her knee.

"Have you seen all his papers and things? Of course, they're yours now, and you have the right to take possession and thoroughly overhaul them. I'll help you. Then something must be concocted for his people. It won't be necessary to tell them the whole story; it would sound so foolish, and perhaps prejudice them. Why do you look like that, Cicely? It surely isn't a thing to laugh at, regarded from our point of view. I'm shocked at you!"

It was only a somewhat wan and tremulous smile which flitted across the girl's strained face. The sudden change of front, from the accuser whose class instincts and pride were threatened to the complacent woman of the world who beholds possible good come out of evil, was so characteristic of her aunt that the girl's sense of humour could not but be touched.

"I'm not laughing, Aunt Georgie; but it is funny when you come to think of it. But I don't feel as if I had the least right to pry into his papers. He was nearly a stranger to me."

"My dear, you can't help yourself. You're in it now, the same as we are in the war, and you'll have

to get through it with the most credit and advantage to yourself, precisely the same as we shall have to get out of this war," said Lady Winyard, who took the frankly material view of the great struggle, and was not obsessed nor uplifted by any side issues relative to ideals or the rights of humanity. Presently she put a question which caused the colour to deepen in the girl's cheeks.

"Can't that queer friend of his—Kane—throw any light on it? Was he there when the ceremony took place?"

"Yes, Auntie, he was."

"Well? I'm waiting," suggested Lady Winyard, with a slightly more incisive note in her voice. "Have you had any talk with him?"

"Yes, I have," answered Cicely, conscious that there could be no escape for her from this strict cross-examination. "I was trying to recall what he did say. It isn't easy somehow. It has become difficult, all in a moment, to talk about it. Kane thinks that poor Steering had some idea of making reparation to his family by leaving a wife behind whom they would be glad to welcome."

"Sounds like a kind of conspiracy between two very shady gentlemen," said Lady Winyard quietly. "I think I had better interview Kane, and try and worm all he knows out of him."

Again the smile flickered about the girl's dry lips as she tried to picture that silent, inscrutable person under her aunt's cross-examination. She imagined that Kane would come out of it with the advantage on his side.

"I don't think he really knows very much. They only met in the Legion."

"The Legion? Have they been fighting in the Foreign Legion?" Lady Winyard asked in accents of the strongest surprise.

"I believe so—indeed, I know, because they have both told me."

"Then, depend—depend on it, both have something to hide. The Foreign Legion is the last desperate avenue in which a gentleman may retrieve his honour, if not his fortunes. To most of them it merely provides a decent grave. I shall certainly interview Kane after dinner. You needn't shake your head, child. I'm your guardian at the moment and it is my duty to make every inquiry, and try to safeguard the situation and you. Left to yourself, Heaven only knows what you would be likely to do?"

"I shouldn't do anything at all, Auntie, but go on precisely as if nothing had happened."

"Ah, but that is quite impossible! If we do certain things we have to take and abide by their consequences. If you really are Lady Steering, then you can't go on being a V.A.D. here, unknown to all whom it concerns."

"It concerns only me and the poor dead man at the moment," said Cicely mournfully.

"That is only true in a limited sense," observed Lady Winyard. "Unfortunately, none of us can live to ourselves. Besides, no doubt they are in frightful anxiety at Steering Hall, or Deverills, or wherever it is they live. We must consult together, and then his people must be written to. But, first of all, I must see Kane."

"I've been' writing to daddy, Auntie. What had I better do with the letter? I can't finish it to-night."

"There is no hurry about *your* people, my dear. They're all right. I'm glad you mentioned that you had been writing to him—for, as I said before, he'll hold me responsible, and your father is not a nice man when really roused, Cicely. The Marsham temper is not a very pleasant obstacle to get up against."

"I've never seen father show the Marsham temper."

"I have. Once he was very angry with me, and I've never forgotten it. And he would certainly say I ought to have looked after you better. Well, it is seven o'clock, and I am positively famishing of hunger; and I know matron is waiting with oceans of things to tell me. After dinner, Cicely, I'll send a message for Kane, and try and get to the bottom of this strange story. Only for your sake, child, and nothing else. Heaven knows we've all faults enough, and I should be only too glad to bury poor Steering without raking up his past; but, after all, in England we still owe something to family."

With that majestic utterance, Lady Winyard passed into the bedroom beyond to remove her bonnet.

Cicely gathered up her writing materials and went into her own room, which was quite close at hand, in the same corridor.

No sooner was she inside the door than the things she carried fell from her nerveless hands, and, feeling weak and spent, she threw herself on the still unmade bed, and gave way to a burst of almost hysterical sobbing.

CHAPTER VI

MISS CAROLINE CHIEVELY, from the Manor of Deverills, walked down the village street of Much Havers in the drowsy sunshine of a May afternoon.

Summer had come with a rush to England, after a long, cold spring, and the lanes and gardens and hedgerows were a wonder of beauty, the air scented

with the sweetest of all perfumes—those which Dame Nature provides.

Much Havers was a typical English village, such as one can see any day within a ten-mile radius of London. It, however, was a good five-and-twenty miles from the heart of things, and not easy of access, its nearest station being Verhamsted, on the Great Northern line, three miles distant.

Much Havers had not much use for a railway station, since it had no commerce requiring transit facilities, and the few travelling passengers were so seldom in a hurry that they did not dream of complaining about the three-mile walk to the station. There was a fly obtainable at a high price, and for the favoured few an occasional drive could be obtained in the postcart. But since the war opened that had been dispensed with, because the postman had enlisted, and the bags were now fetched to and from the station on a tricycle.

Miss Chievely was a large, masculine person, with a somewhat forbidding cast of countenance and a slight suspicion of a moustache. She was held in wholesome awe by the villagers, whom she ruled with a rod of iron, for their ultimate good. Nothing was hidden from her, and she delivered judgment with the air and with the assurance of a Solomon. Malcontents or revolutionaries who resented the rigid rule and supervision which Deverills, in the person of Miss Caroline, exercised over Much Havers generally found their way out of it. Public opinion was too strong for them.

The gates of Deverills opened on the roadway, just at the top of the village street, and the church and rectory were close by, so that there was literally no escape for the villagers from active supervision. Most of them, however, did not resent it. It had always been so, and always would be so, and the children still

curtsied to their betters, and the little ones from Dame Deverill's Old Foundation School still wore red flannel capes, and horrid little round black hats with a red band, and sat in a demure row in the two front pews before the altar rails.

Deverills marched with Steering Hall, which was the principal seat (as the guide-book had it) of the Chievely family. The guide-book also explained how the two estates had been amalgamated by marriage, in the end of the eighteenth century, between Giles Chievely, first Baron Steering, and Margaret Deverill, daughter of Christopher Deverill of Deverills Manor.

They were very old families both, and once upon a time had been rich and powerful. The decline and fall of the Chievelys would make no mean story, and might incidentally illustrate some of the evils of the old feudal system. But it has naught to do with the present record of how the infusion of some new blood into the family tree caused it to shoot out into an entirely new direction.

Miss Chievely, then, was a tall and commanding figure in an extremely short coat and skirt of homespun tweed, a striped silk shirt, and a round, unbecoming straw hat with a straight brim and a somewhat aggressive quill set at the wrong angle. None of the Deverill women had ever known how to buy or put on clothes, and had of late years been too poor to pay anybody to tell them how to do it.

She walked manfully, supported by a shepherd's crook, and two spaniels ran at her heels. She had come down in the heat of the afternoon to get the second post, which was not delivered until the evening. She was not as yet engaged in any active form of war work. Her ambition had been to be commandant in the local Voluntary Aid hospital, but she had been thwarted, because it was the aim of everybody who knew her to keep her out of it. Though a

well-meaning person, she was neither a tactful nor a considerate one, and would have had the whole place by the ears in a few hours. She never forgot for a moment that she was a Chievely, and expected from all and sundry the same humble deference and court she received from the villagers in Much Havers.

There was a postmistress in Much Havers—one Fanny Killick, the widow of a former bailiff at Deverills, and in her early years a housemaid in that august establishment. It was sadly thinned now, and the family dignity was sustained and upheld by three maidservants and Godley, Mrs. Chievely's maid.

Mrs. Killick was behind the counter, with her back to it, sorting out the letters, when Miss Chievely's rather large shadow darkened the doorway. Mrs. Killick had been deeply and personally interested in a large square envelope of thin, foreign-looking stationery, addressed in a flourishing, stylish handwriting to Lady Steering, Steering Hall, Much Havers, Hertfordshire, England. The address evidently had been written by one not immediately familiar with the Chievely affairs. No Steering had lived at Steering Hall for many years; it was now merely the residence of the bailiff who managed the Home Farm.

"Afternoon, Fanny," said Miss Chievely, who never dreamed of allowing her former dependent the dignity of her married title. "Very warm to-day. Heavy mail, I see. I suppose you are getting more and more letters from the front for the village folk?"

"A goodish few, miss," answered Mrs. Killick, with some slight signs of perturbation, as she turned round to meet the eagle eye of Miss Chievely. "Here's one for her ladyship, miss, from France."

Miss Chievely stretched out an eager, even a curious, hand, and carefully scanned the writing on

the envelope, likewise the pink stamp "Passed by Censor."

"I don't know who this can be from, Fanny. Well, is that all?"

"Yes, miss—no, miss—I'm not through them yet. Perhaps you'll kindly sit down for a minute or so."

"I don't want to sit, thank you. Can't I come round and help you?"

It was with a distinct though suppressed smirk of satisfaction that Mrs. Killick replied demurely :

"No, miss, thank you. Against the regulations. As much as my place is worth. I'd be disgraced and paid off."

"Silly, I call it!" was Miss Chievely's comment; and, standing straight up in the middle of the floor, she continued to examine with the utmost closeness the strange envelope with the unfamiliar handwriting which had come from the French war zone for her mother.

It was a lady's handwriting, and, further, had a very pronounced crest in red—the war colour—on the flap. The worst of taste, Miss Chievely inwardly pronounced it, yet it whetted her curiosity. Who could be writing to her mother from France? And what was the letter about?

"Very probably the matron of some hospital, or one of the voluntary workers swarming in France, writing about one of our own men here," she decided, speaking her thoughts out aloud for the intentional delectation of the postmistress.

"'Ere's some more, miss—all from France," said Mrs. Killick, handing over a bulky package, and likewise another small letter.

The effect of the latter was very marked on Miss Chievely. She coloured up and then went quite pale, and walked out of the post office rather hurriedly for her.

Without looking either to the right or to the left, she returned to the high end of the village street, and entered the Deverills grounds by a wicket close to the churchyard. All the Deverills were buried in that old churchyard, in a large square enclosure, adorned by strange old stone tombs whose tablets set forth their various virtues and achievements.

Miss Chievely sat down on the broad stone balustrade which surrounded it, and after handling the small foreign letter for several indecisive minutes, slit the envelope with the silver knife attached to her workmanlike chatelaine.

She recognised the handwriting as her brother's, and though it was addressed to her mother, she felt herself perfectly justified in opening it. Now, Caroline Chievely, hard to the world, had one complete object of adoration, and that was the frail and gentle mother whom she watched over and cared for with a protecting, almost a motherly, love. She knew—none better—how the ne'er-do-well, who had brought much sorrow and shame to Deverills and to the name he bore, and who had finally disappeared into the unknown, had wrung her mother's heart and whitened her hair and set deep circles under the sweetest eyes in the world.

And so she took it upon herself to open that letter which had come suddenly out of the void, and with full determination that if it contained anything of a wounding character she would suppress all knowledge of its arrival. She did not work out the ethics of the situation, though in ordinary affairs she would not have been guilty of any breach of the accepted laws of honour and integrity regarding other people's affairs and property. The sole argument she might have advanced to justify her conduct was that it was her bounden duty to protect her mother from further suffering. Caroline Chievely had felt the disgrace her brother's reprehensible conduct had inflicted on the

family to such a degree that she blamed the whole sex indiscriminately, holding them responsible for all the misery of the world.

Her favourite contention was that the manhood of England had proved itself incompetent and effete, and that they had had their chance and failed to make good or to create a world fit to live in. The war, and its splendid vindication of manhood, had slightly taken the wind out of her sails, but she could still find cause for criticism and for blame.

Perhaps the fact that she had no brother or very near relative in the fighting had helped her to take a very partial and not too sympathetic view of the mighty struggle. Exciting events did not chase each other towards Much Havers, and though Caroline was strong, she was conscious of an inward flutter of the heart, which communicated itself to the firm hand which held the open sheet. It was quite a long letter, and ran as follows :

“Cœur la Reine,

“Fouches, France,

“April 30.

“MY DARLING MOTHER,—The day has come for me to write to you, and I have the feeling—as Tommy says—that my number is up. It is not possible for me to tell you here all that has befallen me since that awful day we parted in the dawn at Deverills, and I looked back to see your white face at the window.

“The record of these years is not so black as might be painted. At least I have done nothing to add to the sum of the shortcomings which drove me from England; and I have been three years in the Foreign Legion, fighting in puny frontier wars for France, and meeting many good fellows, most of them driven into the wilderness through their own sins or the cruelty of others.

"At the moment of writing I'm in a hospital, a partial crock, after wounds received in some of the Legion's worst fighting. Last winter I had hoped to go back, but somehow I think I will not now. I don't ask for forgiveness for all the misery I caused. Mothers don't need these prayers. They forgive because that is why they live—to suffer and endure and hold on to the end.

"Through you, remembering your divine heart, I have never feared death, but will go with a smile to my Maker, and take what recompense He appoints. I have the feeling that, through your prayers, there will be another chance for me on the other side. I don't take it as my right, dearest; and don't think I am not sorry, or that I have never longed for the good life of an English gentleman in his own place, and where he had earned the approval of his own conscience, and his neighbours' kindly smiles.

"God! But I have longed for that, with a longing beside which the pangs of hell will seem as nothing. I somehow think I am going to make some atonement to you at the last, and that it will follow hard on this.

"I want to tell you that since I have been here in France two influences have been at work for my regeneration. One is the affection and loyalty of a good comrade, as fine a one as ever man had. We have fought in the Legion together, and we both won the Croix de Guerre when we made a last stand together in a ghastly ditch on the Meuse front. His name is Dennis Kane, and if you meet him—as you will, for sure—show him what a real mother can be like. He has never had one; his died when he was born.

"The other influence is a girl, who came to this hospital with her aunt. She is a sweet English rose, who reminded me of Joyce at first, though she has courage and is not afraid to tell a man the truth about

himself. If I had met her earlier, mother—— But there! What is the use?

"Something tells me you will meet her one day. These two—Dennis Kane and Cicely Marsham—have together lifted my soul from a miry place and set it once more on the rock.

"God bless you, mother! The wayward boy, who had the misfortune to have all the bad blood of his race in his veins without the courage to fight it, is not afraid of what lies ahead. He has proven himself a man at the last. But, though fighting for France, his heart is in England, and his spirit will haunt the lanes and woods of Deverills—who knows?—clean and pure and holy, as it was in the days when it nestled in the hollow of your hand.

"GILES."

A strange change came over the face of Caroline Chievely as she read, with eyes which seemed to shrink more every moment, that most poignant human document. She was aware now that it was a breach of faith to have opened it, and she did not know how to explain it away.

Giles Chievely had not thought much if at all—about his sister Caroline while he penned that letter; they had never been chums, and she had spoken many bitter words to him while he was dragging their name in the dust; but he certainly had no thought that his written words, like a two-edged sword, would stab her to the heart.

She sat there a long time, the tears making channels on her hard face, her strong mouth working, her heart a complete turmoil of strange passions and un-availing regrets. She seemed to grasp in that hour, for the first time, what life really is for some souls—what a tremendous struggle against odds from the cradle to the grave.

The plea which sank deepest was embodied in the

words: " . . . the boy who had the misfortune to have all the bad blood of his race in his veins without the courage to fight it."

She had never understood, had never been tolerant or pitiful, or even sisterly, in any degree to the brother whose name was never now mentioned in the house. She had even, in a fit of righteous anger, turned his picture to the wall in the long gallery at Deverills, but had made haste to right it when she saw the look on her mother's face.

"God forgive me!" she said under her breath. "Some day I'll ask Giles to forgive me, too. It won't be easy, for the Deverills don't admit themselves in the wrong; but it will have to be done—and I'll do it."

Yet, when she rose, her fingers gripping the other letters, an unutterable fear shook her. Apparently he had written the letter while able enough for the effort. What, then, did the others contain?

She looked at them longingly, but she had had enough. And something told her that her mother, though frail and shrinking in the ordinary affairs of life, would without difficulty find the courage needed for this supreme test.

But she walked very slowly through the wicket and across the sweet woodland ways to the house, conscious for the first time of her passing years. She was the eldest of the family, and had often longed to be a man, feeling herself so fit and capable of upholding the prestige of the house. She had, indeed, girded against Providence for His lack of foresight, and for the injustice that had made her an old maid, a person of very little importance so far as the things that mattered were concerned.

She came slowly to the beautiful old house, regarding it with new eyes as she approached it. It was not the cradle of the Chievelys, but in that house her mother

had been born, and Caroline, too, had first seen the light.

Many vicissitudes had torn and harrowed it, but it was hallowed by all the associations of family life, handed on from father to son. Even Giles, the wanderer and the prodigal, had never been able to cut himself off.

It lay very quiet and still in the drowsy sunshine, and when she entered the hall there was not a sound to be heard anywhere. She looked at the old English chiming clock, standing above the carved stone fireplace. It was just twenty minutes past four. In ten minutes tea would be served in her mother's sitting-room. She decided that she would wait till her mother had had a cup. She felt glad that Joyce, who had come over from her work at a hospital for wounded officers, had returned to her post of duty. She had parted from her at the gate on the way to the village, and had watched her ride off on her bicycle, so there would be none to intervene.

As she set down her walking-stick, and took her hat from her short grey hair, which waved not unbecomingly about her strong face, Lewis, the parlourmaid, came through the swing door with the tea tray.

There were no menservants now in the house of Deverills, and very few women. The staff had been reduced to the smallest possible limit, and only within the last few weeks they had discussed the advisability of trying to let the house, and retire either to a London flat, or a smaller house to be obtained cheaply in some remote village or seaside place. But they had shrunk from the final assault of fate, and Caroline had opposed it entirely on her mother's account.

"Has mother come out of her room yet, Lewis?" asked Miss Chievely, and her voice was so low and subdued that involuntarily the girl cast an inquiring look at her.

"Yes, miss. Godley has just come down for her own tea."

"Oh, all right. Take ours up now. No, there is nothing for you, Lewis. I'm sorry."

Lewis had a sweetheart and two brothers at the front, and lived entirely for the arrival of the mails. Indeed, Miss Chievely had more than once reproved her rather sharply for not giving her mind to her work, not being able to share the acute anxiety of those who have dear ones fighting in the war zone.

Lewis sniffed, for she had had no letter from her boy for ten days, and was now convinced that he was killed, wounded, or missing, and that the War Office was purposely keeping her in the dark. She carried up the tray rather unsteadily, but managed, however, to take in everything that was required, and it was not until she had finally disappeared that Caroline, taking her courage in both hands, ascended to her mother's room.

CHAPTER VII

THE large, aggressive, managing woman may command attention in a limited area, but it is the small woman who rules the world.

Lady Steering, not more than five feet four inches in height, with a slim, fragile figure and a very quiet, almost a deprecating, manner, had ruled autocratically in her husband's heart and in the house of Deverills all her life. Even her eldest daughter, not easily abashed, stood in awe of certain of her moods.

Her delicate colouring, unimpaired after sixty-two years of life, rather more charged with sorrow and

anxiety than falls to the common lot, her sweet, sensitive mouth, her delicate grace, were typical of the things men are willing to die for.

She had no rights save love in the world, nor asked any, and everyone who knew her adored her. The soft black of her widow's frock, with the little white turnover collar and wristlets, had never been discarded, and they were always fresh and spotless. She was dainty in all her ways, and could no more have arrayed herself in the sports clothes which were the delight of Caroline's heart than she could have appeared at her own breakfast-table in an untidy dressing-gown. She had certain ideas about woman's power and place in the world, but they were as far apart from Caroline's as the two poles.

She was knitting busily, having found her war *metier* in providing comforts required for soldiers. She had some relatives—distant, it is true—and many friends in the fighting areas, and her parcels were always welcome, because they were chosen, and packed with so much consideration and wisdom, and invariably contained exactly what their recipients had been sighing for.

Her smile, as she looked up to greet Caroline's entrance, was sweet and unruffled as usual, and she did not, in that cursory glance, observe anything unusual in her daughter's expression.

"Have you had a nice walk, dear?" she asked. "I'm afraid Joyce would find it hot cycling back. She looked so flushed when she came in, poor child. I was quite sorry to see her."

"Oh, Joyce doesn't mind the cycling in the least. I only wish I were half a head smaller—I'd follow suit. But I haven't yet seen the bicycle I would trust myself on."

A little humorous light crept into Lady Steering's eyes.

"You are such a splendid walker, dear, and have the advantage of short creatures like Joyce and me."

"All the same, I could have dispensed with the last two inches, Mother," was Caroline's good-humoured retort, as she sat down at the tea-table. "For one thing, one could buy stock clothes, which would be a distinct economy in war-time."

Lady Steering gave her shoulders a little shrug. She had many of the fixed ideas of her class, and ready-made clothes did not enter into her scheme of things. She could wear, and, as a matter of fact, had worn, shabby clothes most of her life, but they had always borne the *cachet* of their origin from first to last.

"A very doubtful blessing. Well, and how is the village this afternoon? Has Fanny heard from her boy yet?"

"No, Mother; but by observing all the other letters which are passed by the censor for Much Havers, and reading the post cards, Fanny manages to bear up," answered Caroline, still smarting from the post-mistresses rebuff of her offer of help. "I hope you had a good sleep?"

"No, dear, I did not sleep. I felt strangely restless. Do you think there is any thunder in the air? I even persuaded myself, as I lay there perfectly still, that I could hear the guns in Flanders. You know General Borrowdale, when he was on his last leave, told me he heard them at Truefitts quite distinctly on Sunday afternoon."

"I dare say. But it might be quite as easily guns at Sheerness, or anywhere else," answered Caroline absently. "Do you think Joyce will stop on at Wortley, Mother? She seemed particularly aggravated with Mrs. Wakefield to-day."

Lady Steering sighed a little as she sipped her tea.

"I did not encourage her to talk about Mrs. Wakefield, as no doubt you observed. All I said to her

was that she must remember that the standard is different. The money standard has never counted with the Chievelys, Caroline, and naturally the child does not enjoy having its domination thrust on her."

"I don't think it's that, Mother," said Caroline, for Joyce had talked with more frankness to her than either of them ever observed towards their mother.

Though so widely differing in disposition and interests, the sisters were very good comrades, and both were more modern in their ideas than their mother would have approved. She still ruled at Deverills, and made them bow to her decrees; but she could not rule their spirits, and both longed for the day which would free them from a bondage to old tradition and prestige, which, though never harsh, was inflexible, and had of late become very irksome. "The Chievely standard is all very well," Joyce had said discontentedly that very day, "but it doesn't lead anywhere. Perhaps the war will get us out on a different road."

They did not hurry over tea, and Lady Steering, waited on assiduously by her daughter, made not the smallest inquiry concerning Caroline's visit to the post office. As no letters had been offered, she concluded that none had come.

"Of course, the ideal thing would have been if we could have afforded to have the hospital ourselves here at Deverills," said Lady Steering, in whose mind Joyce's service with the rich Americans seemed to be rankling. "Sometimes one wonders a little at the dispositions of Providence as regards wealth; but we can always thank Him—and we do—that there are in England even yet, things which money cannot buy."

Caroline waited for her to specify them, but as she did not go on, she rose and rang the bell for the tea tray to be removed. When they were alone again she, feeling unaccountably nervous, said quite abruptly :

"Mother, something has happened. A lot of letters came from France this afternoon."

"Letters—for me, do you mean?" asked her mother, looking up with a mild surprise. "What kind of letters?"

"One from Giles—I opened it, darling. I suppose I ought not; but I was so afraid in case it might contain something that would hurt you. You understand, don't you, dear?"

It was rather pathetic to see the tall, capable-looking woman bending so humbly towards the little one, not in the least sure how her attitude would be interpreted. Her mother, with no sign of haste or perturbation, except that her hands trembled a little on her soft knitting, laid it down on the small table by her side.

"A letter from Giles! Where is it?"

Her voice had a strange, far-away ring, and her face somehow had changed. As Caroline stood a little apart, glancing occasionally at the face bent so intently over the precious missive that had suddenly been hurled out of the unknown, she realised, with an odd sense of bitterness, that the writer of that letter was the only real factor in her mother's life. She had borne the incredible sorrows he had heaped up for her with a dignity which nothing could break or shake, but her first-born and only son represented the pivot of her existence, and his sisters did not count.

Well, it added but one more item to the sum of life's injustice, and Caroline, though not a student of the Bible, suddenly reflected on how faithful a picture was presented in the parable of the Prodigal Son.

Her mother neither moved nor spoke as, through her gold pince-nez, she read every word of the closely written sheet. When she had finished she began again and read it through. Then she said, quite quietly:

"God answers prayer, Caroline, after all. May He forgive me for having doubted it. He will bring your brother back to Deverills, and we shall lift up our heads again."

The words stabbed Caroline, for she had no such expectation. She had taken her brother's letter as a farewell message, and believed, though she had as yet no proof of it, that he was already dead.

"I am so thankful it has come, Mother," she said softly. "Here are some other letters, which may, perhaps, throw some light on his."

She took up a quaint silver paper-knife with a twisted handle from the writing-table, and slit the envelope bearing the red crest. Her mother stretched out her hand with the same eagerness; and before she had read many lines gave a little cry, and her head fell forward, while the sweet pink colour died out of her cheeks, leaving them wan and grey.

"I was premature—my boy is dead, Caroline! Oh, I think it is harder after reading his letter! It was better before—one could always hope, and now everything is over!"

She permitted the letter to flutter from her fingers to the floor, and leaned back, covering her face with her lawn handkerchief.

Caroline brought her vinaigrette, with which the Victorian woman always fortified herself in moments of weakness, but her mother waved her aside.

"Just a moment, my dear. I shall get my courage back——"

But a little moan succeeded her words, and it seemed a long time to Caroline, standing awkwardly by, her big heart full of sympathy, which she did not know how to express, until her mother regained the wonderful self-control which had helped her through so many dreary days at Deverills.

"I think you may read out the letter to me now."

No, not Giles's letter—the one I threw away. It is from some woman in the hospital where he was. Let me hear what she has to say about him."

Caroline, eagerly enough, began to read the diplomatic epistle which Lady Winyard had concocted in her sitting-room at Cœur la Reine.

"DEAR LADY STEERING,—I have a somewhat heavy and difficult task before me, but that is so common an experience in war-time that one need not dwell unnecessarily on it.

"I came here in February last to run this hospital for the French Red Cross, and among our hospital orderlies was one calling himself Mr. Steering, whom we now know to have been Lord Steering, your son. He had been wounded on the Meuse front, fighting with the French Foreign Legion, and remained here as orderly until he could be passed once more fit for active service. His death was owing to a bomb from a hostile aircraft which passed over us yesterday.

"I have a niece here with me—my brother's child, Cicely Marsham; one of the Lesterford Marshams—no doubt you have heard the name. Your son fell in love with her, and at his request, and in my absence at Boulogne on urgent business connected with the hospital (I hope you will observe my absence, for, as her present guardian, I should not have given my consent), he persuaded her to marry him on his death-bed. The poor girl, bewildered, and urged to this extraordinary sacrifice by those who, perhaps, ought to have known better, consented, and the ceremony was performed by a chaplain from the nearest British camp. I am assured it is quite legal, though I had my doubts. My niece, of course, remains with me, and I have not yet had the courage to inform her father.

"I have no hesitation in writing to you, because I am sure you will be glad to have definite news of

your son, whom, I understand, you had lost sight of for some years. I shall hope to hear from you in due course, and with every sentiment of regret and condolence, believe me, yours sincerely,

“GEORGINA MARSHAM WINYARD.”

“It is an impertinent letter, Caroline!” said Lady Steering, who, as she listened, appeared to have gathered all her shattered forces, and was now able to grasp even the finer shades of these strange happenings with a nicety which amazed Caroline. “It could only have been written by a woman who has very little niceness of feeling. It is a sort of defiance. Don’t you see she is really anxious and a little conscience-stricken? No doubt they knew all about your poor brother, and engineered the marriage beforehand. Indeed, it is obvious on the face of it. A hospital orderly—poor Giles! What is in the other letter, Caroline?”

Once more the little paper-knife came into requisition, and from the inner package came sundry legal-looking documents, also a letter written in another hand.

“Someone else seems to have a finger in the pie, Mother,” said Caroline, with a kind of cheerful curiosity. Now that her mother had recovered from the immediate shock the whole affair was assuming an interest most acute, and very welcome as a break in the undoubted monotony of Caroline’s present days.

Dennis Kane had written very shortly, but managed to say more than Lady Winyard, and to throw further light on the extraordinary affair at *Cœur la Reine*.

“MADAM,” he began, too retiring and modest to address the mother of his dead friend as Lady Steering, “I feel it to be my duty and privilege to send

you a few lines about your son, who was my friend and comrade.

"Indeed, he asked me to write, while he was able to speak, and to assure you that he died without any qualms or fears, trusting in the mercy of the God of whom he learned at your knee. These are his words. I feel that it is almost an impertinence to add to them, but I should like to say that never had man better friend or truer comrade.

"We met first in Paris, and we have been together, side by side, fighting for Liberty in the Foreign Legion, where his name will be remembered among many who have given deathless lives for France.

"I should like to add, if it will not be considered an intrusion, that though he fought and died for France, his heart was in England, and he cherished the hope that he would be able to come back one day to atone (these were his words, madam) for the feebleness of his service to his native land.

"Of you he spoke sometimes—at the bivouac, in the dying light of the camp fire, or the black darkness of the front-line trenches—as men speak of what is holy and enshrined in their hearts. Through him I learned to believe in, and to understand, what I had missed, because I had no mother. I hope that you will be comforted. It is easy to take the name of God on one's lips—it is such as you who keep alive faith in Him in an impossible world.

"Yours respectfully,

"DENNIS KANE."

Both these women, though so different in faith and feeling, were immensely moved by these lines.

Lady Steering read this letter over again, and handed it to Caroline, with the remark :

"That is an extraordinary letter, Caroline. But he understood my son. We must meet."

"Dennis Kane—if it is his real name—he is Irish, and a revolutionary, Mother," said Caroline, who drove things to the ultimate conclusion, and could not rest until everything was explained, tabulated, set in its proper category. It was this method with people which made her so disliked and feared even among her intimates. Some wag of their acquaintance had christened her the "Dissector."

"The name is of no consequence. It is a common name—possibly it is an assumed one."

"But he's been well educated, Mother. His writing is peculiar, but he writes like a poet! How strikingly he expresses himself! But you notice he does not say anything about this person who claims to be Giles's wife. Shall I look up the Marshams, Mother?"

Lady Steering said neither yea nor nay; her thoughts were with the past, and the extraordinary volume of communications which had been hurled at her from the void had quite obviously shaken her natural calm. For the first time there appeared on her face and in her bearing actual signs of her sixty-two years. Caroline flew down to the library, and a few minutes later returned with the necessary information.

"They seem all right, Mother. Marshams of Lesterford Park, Lesterford. But none of them appear to live there now, and it has passed to people called Dobbs. Well, what is going to happen? Shall we wire or write to all these people? What can I do first to help?"

Caroline was thoroughly in her element at the moment, ready for any action, any emergency. Her mother's next words startled her very much.

"There isn't anything to be done except to go to France. I shall go immediately."

"Mother, it isn't possible!" she cried shrilly. "You have not been away from Deverills for years."

"No, of course not. I remained here lest at any

moment my boy should come back and not find me here. It was what I lived for. Now he will not return to me; but I can go to him."

"But, Mother, what is the good? He will—he will be buried before we get there."

"I understand that. But surely you know that his dear body must come home and be buried beside his father. No Chievely, except your great-uncle, the admiral, who died at sea, has ever been buried away from Steering," said Lady Steering, looking her daughter straight in the face, as if amazed that any question or comment on the obvious should have been called forth.

"But, Mother, there is a war. I don't believe you will even get a passport."

Lady Steering smiled, as if that was a very small affair to be disposed of without effort.

"These things can be managed. I think I may just have a little influence yet in high quarters."

"Not with this Government in power, Mother. It's all topsy-turvy. If you were plain Mrs. Steering from Nowhere you might have a chance, but not now."

The faint smile of assurance still lingered on Lady Steering's lips. She was a rather frail woman, of whom the world outside her own narrow circle had never heard, but never was any woman more fully conscious and convinced of her own power.

"There are ways, you will see. Besides, don't you see it is necessary that I should see this girl—or woman—who claims to be my son's wife? Nothing can be done by correspondence. There are circumstances in which letters are necessary; but their business is to complicate life, never to clear it. I shall go to-morrow to the Foreign Office, and lay the facts before them. If possible, I shall cross to Boulogne by the night boat."

"Boats don't run by schedule or time-table any

more, Mother," murmured Caroline out of the depths of her astonishment. "You go when you can. I don't think you are really able for this journey. Wouldn't you trust me, Mother? I am very strong and capable, and my French is good enough for everyday purposes. I would do everything—and love doing it."

Her whole being thrilled at the vista of action, new sensation, possible achievement, which opened before her. Her mother very gently shook her head.

"You don't understand. No one can do this except myself. But you could come with me if you like. I could dispense with Godley. She would be quite useless, anyhow, in a foreign country. We shall do the necessary packing to-night, go to London by the early train to-morrow, and simply stay there at Brown's Hotel until we get the permit to cross to France."

She rose from her chair as she spoke, folded up her knitting, and looked calmly at Caroline—a transformed creature, no longer needing sheltering care, or rest, or inaction, but ready for every emergency.

"Mother, you are a marvel!" said Caroline. "And I don't know where I am!"

CHAPTER VIII

THERE was a private chapel in the grounds of Cœur la Reine, surrounded by the headstones covering dead and gone servitors and other privileged persons who had been connected with the château in its years of prestige and glory. The members of the august family themselves were buried in various vaults, some in the church, and a few in a gigantic mausoleum, to which

one of France's most famous sculptors had contributed the group of angels guarding the entrance.

Not very far from this rather overwhelming expression of a family's grief was a very simple marble cross, which recorded that here slept Sylvia Yvonne, only daughter of François and Sylvia Biancourt. The date was early in the century.

By dint of hunting up old records, and making inquiries of the villagers, Cicely had discovered that the mother of this child had been English, and that she had refused to have her white dove buried under the dreadful stones of the vaults, or within the sealed doors of the mausoleum. The chevalier, who had lived but to please the sweet rose he had culled from an English garden, had agreed to her wish.

To this little burial-ground in the forest Cicely often extended her walk when she was off duty; and there they buried Giles Steering, simple soldier of France, after having obtained permission from the Comtesse Biancourt.

To the new-made grave of the husband whom she scarcely mourned came Cicely, with a posy of early summer flowers, on the second Sunday following his death. She had walked bareheaded, save for her nurse's flowing white coif, from the house to the burying-ground, and her sweet face wore an expression which indicated that her heart was not quite at rest.

She was beginning to realise that the thing she had done might—nay, probably would—have far-reaching consequences. She had stoutly repeated, and intended to hold to, her decision to make no difference in her life; also, she had forbidden them one and all to call her Lady Steering. Madam, she had to put up with, though her glass told her how little she looked like a madam. The stress of these days, and the continuous thought which filled waking hours and haunted her

oft-times sleepless pillow, had robbed the English rose of part of her bloom. But she was a picture of surpassing loveliness as she bent to her sacred task of putting a handful of roses on Giles Steering's grave for remembrance.

Her tears rose as she did so, for the incident had been brief and tragic—a strange, though perhaps not unfitting, close to a life which had been brief and tragic too.

She was aware that letters had been sent to England, but she herself had declined to take any action—she was simply waiting for the next chapter in her life to unfold itself.

It was very peaceful there in that sacred enclosure, which had entirely escaped desecration, perhaps even observation, at the hands of the invading armies in the earlier stages of the war. The chestnuts and the poplars waved in the gentle summer breeze, which made a kind of soothing rhythm among the leaves. They had already taken on, all too quickly for Cicely, who loved the spring, the deeper, more sombre hues of summer.

Not much care was now taken of the burying-ground at Cœur la Reine. The living demanded so much, and labour was so scarce, the dead, perforce, who could make no complaint, or take any heed, had to be content with a hasty scythe passed over the lush grass, or a weed pulled up here and there by some kindly hand.

There were no weeds yet on the new-made grave, which had been opened side by side with that which contained the child of the English mother. There was something suggestive in the idea of the beaten man of the world, the soldier of fortune, whose life had been so full of waywardness and strange adventure, and the pure little child, unsullied by contact with the world, sleeping side by side under the swaying poplars of

France. Cicely was imaginative enough to conjure up a picture of all the incident stood for, and she was still dreaming of it when a quick footstep disturbed her solitude, and, looking up quickly, she beheld Dennis Kane.

She was surprised to see him. Since the day a little company of English and French had stood by the open grave of Giles Steering she had not had any speech with him whatsoever, and had the feeling that he wished to avoid her. She rose from her kneeling posture, bade him "good day" simply and naturally, and pointed to the inscription on the little cross.

"You have seen this, perhaps? Father de Casanet told me the story. She was the English wife of one of the chevaliers, and she would not have her little baby shut up in that dreadful mausoleum. I am so glad! I understand it so well!"

"I have heard the story. But she was very happy here with her chevalier; and there were other children --one son at least, whose name stands high on the noblest records of France."

"Why do you say that, tell me?" she asked suddenly, struck by the words. "I did not mean to hint that she was unhappy."

"No, perhaps not; but my thought is that international marriages are not always unhappy. It is possible for racial differences to be united, and even blessed, by a great love."

"I suppose so--though I could not marry a foreigner," said Cicely musingly. "Do you come often here?"

"Every day, Lady Steering," he answered, and observed her to start and slightly draw back at the appellation. "But I have been sent to seek you. They are all seeking you at the château. Visitors from England have arrived."

Cicely, rubbing the brown earth from her fingers

on her handkerchief, looked at him with misgiving, and seemed to shrink still further.

"Visitors from England! What kind of visitors?" Then suddenly she brightened, and the colour rose high in her cheeks. "Not, by any chance, my darling father?"

Kane shook his head.

"No. Two ladies have arrived. Lemoine told me. I believe it is Lady Steering and one of her daughters."

"Oh, I can't go to see them! I shan't know what to say to them. I can't explain anything. She will ask me questions I can't answer!" she cried a little wildly. "Can't you go back to the house and say I can't come? That I am ill—anything! I will slip back and go to my room, and I'm sure it will be true immediately, if it is not true now! I'm positively trembling with apprehension."

Kane's face became transfigured with an incredible tenderness. He had the look of a man who longs, but does not dare, to protect and shelter the woman he loves.

"You must reflect that to do that will only postpone the hour which has to be gone through. Believe me, the thing to do in the difficult hours of life is to approach them unflinchingly. Then they are shorn of half their terrors."

"You are always talking like a book," she said petulantly. "But it doesn't help in the least. Can't you be natural for once? Then, perhaps, you might just by chance be of some little use."

She did not know why she spoke to him thus, wounding him purposely, as we so often wound even those we love.

Did she love this strange, silent, grave-faced creature whom she had christened the Mystery Man? It would be too much to say yes; but certainly he had the power to disturb her, and in his presence she was

conscious of his personal magnetism, even of a kind of deep and fearful joy in his proximity.

She was too unversed in the affairs of love to grasp what these signs and portents might stand for. But of one thing she was passionately sure—that she was glad the hostile bomb had not found its target in him, and that it was Steering and not Dennis Kane who slept under the daisied sod beside the little French child.

"Where have they come from—on Sunday, too?" she asked, as she prepared to go when he made no answer but only turned away from her. "How did they get out from Boulogne?"

"They came by motor-car—that is all I know. A Staff car and a Staff officer drove them."

"Oh!" said Cicely, with a little gasp. "Well, I shall have to face it, I suppose. Thank you for coming to tell me. Is it true what M. Lemome told me this morning—that you return to your Legion very soon?"

"Yes, Madam."

"Are you glad, or sorry?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Perhaps 'supremely indifferent' would best describe my feelings."

Her eyes blazed a little as she looked at his face.

"You juggle with words that don't mean anything. You know perfectly well that you are not, nor could ever be, supremely indifferent about anything. I should like to lift the lid off once and see the seething cauldron you call your heart."

"Madam, it would not be a sight for such as you."

"Why not? I'm neither a child nor a fool, and I can stand up, as my brothers say, to most things. So you are going to-morrow? But I'll see you again. Don't dare to go away without saying good-bye!"

The lids drooped a little over Kane's sombre eyes—lest, perhaps, she should see the sudden glow her words inspired.

"I will obey you, Madam," he said quietly and simply.

Then, as if unable to carry on the conversation, or too conscious of the strain it laid upon her, she darted from him and disappeared in the cool shadow of the trees, leaving him by the grave of his dead comrade, to fight the battle which had begun to rage in an entirely new direction in his undisciplined soul.

Before Cicely had reached the end of the open glade, through which so many of the biers of Cœur la Reine had been borne to their last resting-place, she had banished Kane from her mind—or, rather, the ordeal in front banished him from her. She had scoffed at the idea firmly held by her aunt that some of the Chievelys would undoubtedly come out from England to inquire into the circumstances of Lord Steering's death and the extraordinary marriage that had preceded it.

Lady Winyard had read aloud to Cicely the letter she had addressed to the Dowager Lady Steering, and had asked triumphantly whether it was not a very clever, diplomatic document, setting down nothing in malice, but at the same time making it perfectly clear that no condescension on the part of the dead man's family would be brooked by the young wife or those responsible for her.

When Cicely reached the courtyard of the château the Staff car, rather dusty and dilapidated, had already been brought round, and was being inspected, with the bonnet open, by a chauffeur in khaki. To him Cicely immediately addressed herself.

"Whose car is this?"

The man stood up, looked at her steadily, and gave a salute.

All sorts of nurses he had come across in the war zone, and had arrived at a pretty even conclusion regarding them as a class.

"It's the general's, Nurse."

"What general?" asked Cicely, with just a suspicion of her mother's peremptory manner.

"General Borrowdale, Nurse, from Boulogne." Then, as he stooped to his task again, he added genially: "There ain't no flies on 'im."

Cicely encountered the general himself standing in the portico of the château talking with M. Lemoine. That she was the theme of that talk she was made aware by the abruptness with which they paused as she appeared.

"Ah, here is the lady!" said M. Lemoine, with the friendly, even enthusiastic, smile with which he never failed to greet the English rose. He had a profound admiration for her, partly because, being a Frenchman, he was bound to admire beauty, and partly because she had proved herself useful as well as ornamental at Cœur la Reine. She could be depended on in every emergency, even when some of the French sisters sometimes lost their heads.

General Borrowdale, a thin, wiry, eager-looking Chief of Staff, gravely saluted, and Cicely inwardly thanked him that he did not attempt to utter any words of commonplace condolence.

"Visitors are here for me, M. Lemoine?" she said in her clear, cool voice, and with an assurance of manner which might have belonged to one double her years.

"Yes, Madame. They are now in the salon of your estimable aunt, Lady Winyard," answered the surgeon.

"I will go up," murmured Cicely, and tripped away, giving no sign of the inward perturbation to which she was a prey.

"She is certainly very pretty—but a mere child! I don't think it was quite fair, M. Lemoine, to inveigle her into a form of marriage with a dying man," said

the general in his abruptest, most uncompromising English manner.

The Frenchman spread his hands.

"Mon Général, what will you? The man was *in extremis*. He had some great end to serve—some debt to discharge to his family. It was written in his face."

The Englishman merely shrugged his shoulders.

"That doesn't alter the fact that a glorious creature like that should not have been sacrificed. Fortunately he was of quite good family. And perhaps—who knows," he added, smiling rather grimly—"it may double the chances when she is a fascinating war widow. It will be a trying interview upstairs, I don't doubt, for all concerned."

"You, who brought the ladies—poor Steering's mother and sister, is it not?—can perhaps guarantee the future of poor madame?"

"Nothing can be guaranteed in this world of sorry chance, M. Lemoine," answered General Borrowdale. "I have known Lady Steering since my salad days. She represents all that is worth preserving in English womanhood. She is the real thing, M. Lemoine—the type our men are fighting and dying for."

"Ah?" said the surgeon, with a long breath, amazed at the passion with which he spoke. Perhaps he scented an old romance; perhaps not. He had long ceased to marvel at any happening, so full was life of the extraordinary, the inexplicable, the astounding.

"Will you, perhaps, take a walk about the château? It is interesting. One of the few noble houses the invader has not wrecked or levelled in Northern France," suggested the surgeon, as he offered his pocket-case of fine cigars.

The general nodded, and they passed together into the drowsy sunshine, and disappeared in the shadow of the trees.

Cicely, though her heart beat fast, did not permit her growing nervousness to master her. When she had got to the top of the grand staircase she sped, rather more quickly than usual, along the corridor on the first floor to the closed door of her aunt's room.

So thick were the splendid doors in that house, built in the days when a man's house had to be his castle and fortress, to protect him against marauders of every sort, that no sound ever escaped from the rooms they guarded.

The girl paused a moment, expecting to hear the murmur of voices; but all was still, except the moans of someone in the ward at the farther end of the corridor, where all the doors were propped wide open to permit a current of aid to relieve hot brows that could find no rest on their pillows of pain.

Then she turned the handle noiselessly and walked in.

Her aunt's commanding figure in her immaculate uniform, as usual, held the floor. She stood before the stone fireplace with her white hands lightly crossed above her white apron, and was holding forth to the two women in black who sat in front of her.

With the opening of the door she, like the two men in the portico, came to an abrupt stop, and all eyes turned towards the slim figure in nurse's garb who broke upon their colloquy.

Lady Steering rose to her feet, and a tremor shot across her features as her eyes fastened themselves almost relentlessly on the face of the girl who was now her son's wife—the woman who had the power, if she wished and willed it, to send her from the home where she had been born and where she had lived the whole of her life.

Cicely's eyes met hers. Then the heart of each spoke to the other, and, moving forward, the girl stooped with a gesture of indescribable grace, took the

hand that was tensely gripping the side of Lady Winyard's desk and kissed it.

"No, my child!" cried Lady Steering, and the ready tears welled in her beautiful old eyes. "This is your place—here on the heart that has held no image but my boy's all these years."

Lady Winyard, though superficial, was touched inexpressibly, and turning to Caroline, blinking her eyes, she acted on a rare inspiration.

"I think you and I had better make ourselves scarce, Miss Chievely—don't you? Come and see my hospital."

Caroline nodded; but as Cicely turned towards her at the moment she smiled rather jerkily.

"I don't suppose you want to take much notice of me just at present; but, when you're ready, I'm Caroline—merely Caroline," she added, with her queer smile. "But I won't butt in. I'm a good sort when I'm let alone."

There is no doubt that that grotesque speech relieved the painful tension of the moment. Cicely sprang to her and kissed her on both cheeks.

"Oh, I'm so glad you've come too! Don't go too far away, and come back soon," she said; and when the door closed on them she smiled back bravely into Lady Steering's face.

"Come and sit by me, my child, and tell me about you and my boy," said Lady Steering, moving to the stiff Empire couch, compelling Cicely all the way.

"Oh, but, dear Lady Steering, there isn't anything to tell! Really not anything beyond what Aunt Georgie said in her letter. We were just good friends—nothing more. And when that awful day came, and he asked me to do that big thing without which he said he couldn't die happy, I just didn't know what to do. I asked God to help me, and after that it

seemed quite easy to go down and go through with it. Poor dear! I don't know whether it really did make him happy at the end. And I'm so glad you are not angry about it."

"Angry! I? Oh, my dear, you don't understand the relief, the gratitude—the unspeakable joy it is to me to look on your face!"

Had Cicely loved the dead man she might easily have found both food for reflection and cause for pain in these poignant and pregnant words, which really turned back a page in Giles Chievely's wasted life. As it was, she only felt glad that her unpremeditated act had brought any consolation to a woman who had evidently suffered so much.

"I think it is so wonderful of you to have come to France!" she said simply. "And I can't help thinking it is marvellous how you got through. Every day the regulations are stiffening. How did you manage it? If your son had been alive and dangerously wounded, I could have understood it."

Lady Steering faintly smiled.

"When one's heart is set on a thing, as mine was, there are no obstacles," she answered. "At least, none that a woman who knows her own power cannot overcome. I had the great good fortune to have a friend at the Base, who put everything through for me, just as another friend did at the War Office."

"General Borrowdale. I saw him as I came into the house. But how much I wish that you had been able to get here in time!"

"Ah, if only God had permitted that! But I thank Him for all He has done. At least now I know where my boy is; and he has given me the gift of you."

Cicely seemed to shrink a little at that.

"Oh, but I don't want to make any claims," she said quickly. "What I did was just to relieve pain, as one might do anything for a poor hurt body. I

am so glad to see you and to know you, but don't think that I expect anything from you."

Lady Steering patted her hand, and her expression indicated that some part of a load had been lifted from her heart.

"Then you won't send me away from Deverills, my dear?"

CHAPTER IX

CICELY looked precisely as she felt, bewildered and genuinely shocked.

"Leave Deverills!" she repeated. "What can you mean?"

"Precisely what I say, my child. You are my son's wife. Deverills is your home, if you care to occupy it. You have the right to send us all out of it."

"But—but I don't want even to see the place!" cried the girl bluntly, marvelling at the stupidity of the world in general and this good woman's inability to grasp the initial facts of one of the strangest cases in life.

"My dear," said the older woman, with the sadness and dignity of one who has lived and weighed up most of the issues, "you will have to see it. Giles, I am sure, hoped it. Would you like to hear what he said in his letter to me?"

"What letter?" asked Cicely densely. "He hadn't time to write one after he was wounded, poor fellow. He was hardly able to speak, just conscious, nothing more."

"It was written before he died," his mother explained.

"Then he had not the right to speak of me at all," said Cicely in a low voice quite clearly.

Something goaded her into saying these things, for to her clear young candid mind, the one thing which made the situation intolerable would be if they regarded and expected her to behave as a real mourner, an inconsolable widow of the man who had died.

Lady Steering looked so woebegone at that, that the soft heart of the girl instantly melted.

"Don't let us speak about these horrid things!" she cried, laying an impulsive hand on the soft, white, small ones. "And I am sure your son never intended that I should read the letter he wrote to you. It was most sweet of you to come all this way. Didn't you find it very difficult to get the necessary permits? We had trouble ourselves, even though Aunt Georgie was properly accredited to the French Government."

Lady Steering permitted herself a slight smile.

"There are ways and means, my child. Once the Chievelys held high office in the State. Ah, if Providence had just been a little kind, and permitted Giles to bring you to Deverills, history might have repeated itself. Women have great powers behind every throne. Knowing what I know, I marvel that they should seek the other sort of power grudgingly given, and which alienates every man worthy of the name."

"You are talking of the suffrage, aren't you?" said Cicely, delighted to get the conversation away from painful personal topics. "I'm afraid we are all rather interested in it at home, and my sister Ann is really quite keen, and has been known to speak, and wave a banner."

Lady Steering spread her hands in immeasurable disgust.

"My Caroline is like that. She is only restrained from public exhibition by the little control I exercise

so long as she is under my roof. Tell me, is your sister plain? It is only the plain ones who are interested in that sort of thing."

'Cicely laughed and clapped her hands together, and the sound, so full of music, and the added beauty animation bestowed, filled Lady Steering with fresh admiration.

"Oh, no, no!" cried the girl. "That is quite an old bogey, and I'm sure Caroline is a dear. How Ann will enjoy meeting her!"

"And you have only one sister—any brothers, my dear?" asked Lady Steering anxiously.

"Three brothers—such good chaps!"

"What do they do?"

"Well, at the moment they are all fighting or getting ready to fight. Jack, the eldest, was in the Territorials, and is a captain now, fighting on the Yser front. Then Teddy, the second, is in training at Bedford. He joined the Gordons, after trying to convince himself that there was a Scotch strain in our family to justify it. It was only vanity, of course, because he is very good-looking, and has such a nice figure, and was sure the kilt would be immensely becoming. Little Tony, who is just seventeen, is in the Royal Fusiliers. He was a bank clerk when the war broke out, and went and enlisted without telling anybody, pretending, mind you, Lady Steering, that he had turned eighteen!"

This splendid record might have affected Lady Steering, had the two words "bank clerk" not occurred in Cicely's outburst.

"A bank clerk!" she repeated. "I understood from Lady Winyard that you were the Marshams of Lesterford."

"So we are—or were. But we are merely now Marshams, of 83 Goldman Avenue, Streatham Hill. Suburbans of the suburban! Daddy goes to town every

day by the 8.15. They all did, except Tony, who was in a Brixton bank, but it is daddy who brings the fish home in a string bag."

There was just a suspicion of mischief in the girl's eyes as she related these, to Lady Steering, astounding items of family history. Cicely's sense of humour, always acute, was immensely tickled at Lady Steering's scarcely veiled horror, and she began to understand at least one of the predisposing causes of Giles Chievely's complete breaking away from family traditions.

"I am afraid you are poking fun at me, my dear," said Lady Steering helplessly.

"Oh, no, I do assure you I'm not! You see, we are frightfully poor. Ann works as a secretary to a rich woman at Streatham, who has a regular organised system of giving to charities. I help mother in the house, for we can only afford to keep one servant. Our house—Number eighty-three—is so like the other houses in the row, that we had to have a special crinkly knob put on the gate so that daddy and the boys, on dark nights or in a fog, could feel for it, and come into the right house. All sorts of queer things happen in suburbs, Lady Steering. Our neighbours over the way had all their furniture removed last summer, when they were at Herne Bay, by properly dressed workmen in charge of removal vans, and they were professional burglars!"

"But didn't anybody hinder them, or let the people know?" asked Lady Steering in horror.

"Oh, no; that sort of thing isn't done in London. If your neighbour chooses to move twice or thrice a week it isn't any business of yours. Half the time you don't know your neighbours. It is the whole object of mother's life to prevent us knowing them, but they are so very nice—that is, some of them—and others so amusing, that Ann and I simply love them

all. But one thing mother did not allow, and that was ~~that~~ we should join the tennis club. It was rather mixed—I admit.”

“I am glad your mother sees the true proportions of the situation,” said Lady Steering a trifle primly, not even sure at the bottom of her bewildered mind whether this delightful young creature, whose every word and turn of the head betrayed some fresh charm, was not making fun of her somehow. “I want to know about your father now, dear. You have said very little about him.”

Cicely’s eyes suddenly filled with warm, bright tears.

“One keeps the best till the last,” she said simply. “There isn’t anything to tell about daddy, except that he is the best on earth.”

That exhibition of feeling and affection melted the momentary prejudice from Lady Steering’s mind.

“Dear child,” she murmured, and patted the girl’s hand. But Cicely, who did not like displays of emotion, drew a little away.

“I have written to him about what has happened,” she said; “but his answer has not come. When Kane came to tell me visitors had arrived for me at the château, I was so excited, hoping it was daddy! You see, he knows everything, and helps everybody without talking about it. He is simply adored at Streatham. The little newsboys and the crossing-sweepers on the way to the station where he goes every morning say it is a better world because he walks that way.”

“*Noblesse oblige*,” murmured Blanche Steering, with a little wave of her aristocratic hands.

“If that means goodness of heart, it is true,” assented Cicely bravely. “But now I’m sure I’m talking too much, and you must be frightfully tired with your journey. Have you seen M. Lemoine? He was

so kind to your poor son, and he is such a clever surgeon, and such a dear! He will tell you everything about him. Then, you will have to see Father de Cassanet. Mr. Steering was so fond of him. And the funny little notary, M. Voisin, and the dear village people of Fouches. It is all so interesting here, and so very, very French, and the dominating bond is hatred of the German, and the inextinguishable desire to make an end of him."

"I came only to see you, my dear," said Lady Steering firmly, "and to take you home."

"Oh, but," said Cicely, starting back—"I don't want to go. It isn't my home, really, and I don't want you to think of me like that. Couldn't you just forget about me?"

"Impossible, my dear! My boy left you to me."

"But he hadn't the right to do that—when he wrote that letter, anyway! We weren't even engaged. I can't leave my aunt here alone. She has been so good to me. Besides, I love the work, and my dear *poilus* would miss me, I am sure. I get up concerts for them, and sing, in my off-time, and do all sorts of odd jobs, besides being the interpreter and general soother for the household. Sounds quite a formidable array of accomplishments! But it isn't vanity that is making me trot them out. I only want to show that I can't really be spared from *Cœur la Reine*."

Lady Steering's expression was so wounded and reproachful that Cicely blundered on.

"Besides, in a country house in England what could I do? I was born at Lesterford, but I'm a Londoner now, a pure suburban dweller. I should be the round peg in the square hole, dear Lady Steering. Why disturb the even tenor of your way for me at all? Let us, if you like, be quite good friends at a distance. I am sure we shall all be happier for it."

Lady Steering listened to these words with a mixture of feelings.

Outwardly, the new member of her family was everything that could be desired, there was not the slightest fault to be found with her origin. With what joy and pride, therefore, she would show her to the neighbours whom the doings of the ne'er-do-well had so long outraged! There was something to be desired, certainly, in her outlook on life, but Lady Steering had great hopes that such material would be easily moulded into the right type.

Imagining she saw some hesitation on the part of the girl, Lady Steering hastened to press her point home.

"I came with a double purpose—I will take my son home, to lay him beside his father, in Much Havers Churchyard."

"Oh, Lady Steering, I am sorry, but perfectly sure that what you are thinking of will never be allowed in war-time!" she cried, beholding a ghastly vision of the whole business of disinterment, and the journey to England she expected to be in attendance, looking and playing the part of the disconsolate widow!

"I have influence," repeated Lady Steering with an air of quiet assurance. "I have my old friend, General Borrowdale, with me here. He is one of the chief base commandants on the northern coast. I am sure he will make every possible arrangement."

"I don't think he would have the power," said Cicely bluntly. "It is the French authorities who would decide. And, besides, do you think it would be wise? After all, he died for France."

She said it so spontaneously and so sweetly that the heart of the older woman thrilled under the masterly touch. She sat forward eagerly.

"You had a good deal of talk with him, then, that you can speak with such assurance?"

"Oh, yes; heaps of talk."

"And he really loved France?"

"Oh, yes; both he and his friend."

"Ah, tell me about the friend! I shall have to see him, and it will help ever so much if you just tell me all there is to tell about him."

"That would take some considerable time, even if I happened to know anything," answered Cicely; and Lady Steering wondered why she rose and walked towards the window, not being quick enough to note the rising colour in her cheeks.

From a safe distance the girl went on:

"He is Irish—what they call an Irish patriot, I believe—and he has been nursing imaginary wrongs. Well, I think you must be tired now, dear Lady Steering. Let me call my Aunt Georgie, and see about your rooms. Of course, you will stay some days here, won't you?"

"I shall certainly stay until the business for which I came here is attained," said Lady Steering, smiling happily.

"I hope you don't mean taking me back with you," said Cicely. "I don't want to be very rude or unkind, but I simply can't go back to England, Lady Steering."

"But, my dear, Giles would have liked it. I am afraid I must ask you to read his letter, or part of it. He left you in my charge."

Cicely struggled with her rebellious thoughts, and wondered how she could present a picture of the situation to this sweet but completely fixed and determined woman, as she saw it herself.

She stood with her back to the window, the tassels of the blind in her nervous fingers, her figure silhouetted, in all its svelte grace, against the clear light shining through the panes. There was a new line of determination in the curves of her young

body, however, and her eyes had perceptibly hardened.

"Dear Lady Steering, forgive me for saying it, but you are taking quite the wrong view of the whole affair. You see, I have already explained why I consented to go through the marriage ceremony with your son. It is only right and kind to say that I did not care for him, and that if he had recovered it would have been an awful situation for us both. I see now that what I did was quite wrong. But I did not think of his relatives, or that any complications would arise. I thought only of him, and of giving him a moment's ease or happiness in his pain at the last. But I can't be punished for it for the rest of my life."

"Punished! Punished?" said Lady Steering in rather a nettled tone of voice. "But we should take such loving care of you——"

"Oh, but it is the war, and I am a young, strong woman who has answered the nation's call. I can't go and be wrapped up in cotton wool for the rest of my life just because I happen to have made one mistake!"

"Don't call it a mistake, my child. Think, rather, of the joy that has come into my desolate, stricken life!" cried Lady Steering, revealing a sudden glimpse of the real woman. "I will not hide from you that my dead boy wrung my heart and very nearly destroyed my faith in the eternal goodness of God. Nor will I hide from you that one of my principal terrors was lest he should bring home some impossible woman to Deverills and expect me to receive her. Think of the joy and pride with which I shall show my son's widow to the people among whom he was born, many of whom loved him to the end, in spite of all his faults."

Cicely melted.

"When you put it like that," she said doubtfully, "I feel I can't refuse. But it would only be for a visit,

and on the strict understanding that I am to come back to dear Cœur la Reine at the earliest possible moment."

"We shall leave everything an open question," said Lady Steering eagerly.

Cicely hesitated, still toying with the tassels of the blind.

"And—and you would not expect me to wear a widow's dress? I really couldn't. I could travel in my uniform, and nobody could wonder or say a word. It is a protection and an explanation of everything."

"We will not quarrel about that, dear child," said Lady Steering, smiling rather wistfully now that her point seemed to be gained. "I shall love to show you Deverills. It is a dream of what an English home ought to be. Giles loved it. His heart turned to it continually after he had gone out into the wilderness. It will make him happy where he is, I don't doubt, when you are under its roof."

Cicely turned away hopelessly before the persistence with which she made her appeal, on the assumption that it had been a perfectly normal marriage between two who loved one another.

She understood the obsession of a mind long centred and focused on one object alone. She gave a little fluttering sigh and turned towards the door.

"I'm sure Aunt Georgie will think we have been talking long enough. You must be simply dying for tea. I must find Caroline."

She seemed to find courage and comfort in the very name. She felt that the big, strong, frankly spoken woman, whom her small frail mother had evidently in complete subjection, would be the one to help, or, at least, to buttress her in the difficult complications which seemed to be going to follow inevitably on her strange marriage with Lord Steering.

CHAPTER X

SOMEWHAT to Cicely's disappointment her aunt did not oppose Lady Steering's wish to take her back to England.

"It's the right thing from her point of view. Besides, you've got rights, child, and the only way to safeguard them is to be on the spot."

"I don't want any rights from the Chievelys, Aunt Georgie," answered Cicely rebelliously. "And if I go to the Deverills an impossible situation will be created. Can't you see that?"

Lady Winyard shook her head densely—and she could be very dense when she thought it necessary or convenient.

"Don't strain at the gnat after swallowing the camel, Cicely. After all, you *did* marry the man, though for what reason Heaven alone knows! And out of it has arisen this duty to his people. It needn't be big enough to sweep your whole horizon, but I do most certainly agree with Lady Steering that you ought to go back with her."

"Then you don't really need me here, Aunt Georgie, and I've been bolstering myself with quite unnecessary vanity! I really thought my small services indispensable."

"Well, of course they are up to a point, but everybody can be done without in this world, and the sooner we realise and admit it the more comfortable we are. At least, it diminishes responsibility," said Lady Winyard cheerfully. "Now, I wonder whether Ann could come out for a month or two to take your place? It would give her a chance."

"A chance of what?" asked Cicely quite mercilessly.

"A chance of seeing a bit of the world. It's not a

matrimonial chance. Poor Ann is an excellent creature, but her chances in that direction unfortunately are likely to be small."

Cicely knit her brows, trying to picture Ann filling her shoes in the old château. She could not conceive of any circumstances which would make her jealous of Ann, but certainly she did not want her to come to *Cœur la Reine*."

"I shall only make a very short visit, Aunt Georgie, and if you fill up my place I shall just apply to the French Red Cross to be taken on somewhere else. Perhaps the Comtesse Biancourt would take me to her hospital in Paris."

Lady Winyard did not think it likely.

"Anyhow, what you have got to do in the immediate future is to make a little study of your new 'in-laws.' No, don't protest! The way in which you entered matrimony makes no earthly difference to the fact, my dear—you are Lady Steering, and nothing can alter it."

"You are being perfectly abominable, Aunt Georgie, and you know it!" cried Cicely crossly. "You want to get rid of me. Well, I'm going. I can't pretend I'm not sorry, and what I wish is that I had never seen *Cœur la Reine*."

"It was written in the sand, my dear," said Lady Winyard composedly. "But the Chievelys are quite nice people, though the daughter is rather awful to look at."

"I think she is perfectly delightful, and I'm going to find her now to ask her a lot of questions."

Cicely smiled as she made good her exit. It was impossible for her sunny nature to dwell long on the dark side of things, and there was sufficient piquancy in the situation to interest her. She had to search some time for Caroline, whom she discovered at last, standing spellbound at the door of the laundry, where

a number of village women were at work among the hospital linen.

"Whatever are you doing there, Miss Chievely?" asked Cicely. "Do come out of that hot steamy atmosphere! I've been hunting everywhere for you."

"Have you? I've been looking round. I'm rather fond of that game. I'm the one who does the looking round at home. They seem to be a bit primitive here. Didn't it seem worth while setting up proper laundry plant for such a big place as this?"

Cicely shook her head.

"There isn't money for anything hardly, and we have become very clever at makeshifts. Come, and I'll take you to the little wood. I want to ask you oceans of questions. I'm sure we're going to be friends, and I'll need you to help me."

Caroline nodded, blinking her eyes in the queer, emphatic, characteristic fashion peculiar to her.

"I can't imagine what questions you want to ask me. You're comparatively a much-travelled and very experienced young woman. I have been very little away from Deverills."

"But it is just about Deverills I want to ask questions," said Cicely. "I've just been having a talk with Lady Steering. She seems determined to take me back with her to England. *Entre nous*, I don't in the least want to go!"

"Of course not. Could you be expected to want it when you are in the midst of this?" asked Caroline with a wave of her hand towards the white walls and ramparts of the château. "I tried to explain to mother, but you know, or perhaps you don't know, the peculiar adamantine surface quality of what is popularly supposed to be English softness. My mother has never in her life raised her voice above the proper level, or done anything out of the common or conventional line of things, and she has reigned supreme

at Deverills, and kept us all strictly under her, excepting, of course, poor Giles."

"She is very sweet, but I quite understand what you are talking about," said Cicely, smiling at Caroline's queer, delicious way of summing up a situation. "Well, what do you suppose I would do with myself at Deverills? I should be bored to death, and I'm afraid I couldn't hide it. Excuse my speaking so frankly, but I made sure, the moment I set eyes on you, that you were going to be a ripping good sort, and that I could say anything I liked to you."

Caroline's face brightened visibly.

"I am glad you feel like that. I can tell you you've been a surprise to us! I don't know exactly what poor mother expected you to look like. Let us sit down here on this log, and I'll tell you something about Deverills and the Chievelys so that you may understand what you are going to find yourself up against."

Cicely nodded and sat down.

"I suppose you understand that my mother wants to show you off at Deverills?"

"But to whom?"

"The village and neighbourhood generally. *You see, unfortunately my poor brother gave them a lot of room for talk; we hadn't heard anything about him really for several years, and mother lived in dread of some impossible woman turning up making a claim on him, or on us through him. You see what an immense and glorious relief you have been to her?"

"I see. But I'm not really much good. We are so poor as a family, and we live in a suburb. I should be the round peg in the square hole."

"You could never be that in any circumstances," Caroline assured her without the slightest hesitation. "We are poor too—Heavens, how poor! We really ought not to be living at Deverills, and mother will keep on the Home Farm because we've always had it.

And we always seem, somehow, to get rascals as bailiffs! The new one is always going to be a paragon, and retrieve the mistakes and the waste of the others, but he ends in getting us deeper and deeper in the mire."

"But why haven't you tackled it all?" asked Cicely. "You live at home, don't you?"

"Mother wouldn't let me. She's very old-fashioned, you know. She thinks a woman's capacity and nature should be satisfied with afternoon calls, and looking after the village and seeing it walks in the way it should go, and piffle of that kind, which nobody wants nowadays. She is horrified when I tell her the village wants to run itself and resents our interference."

"I see the whole picture! Of course we knew something of it when we were all young at Lesterford. That old régime is passing, Caroline—I may call you Caroline, I suppose?"

"Heavens! of course. Only too pleased you feel that way," said Caroline, with her delightful wide smile and twinkle of her honest eyes. "We're going to get on capitally—I have visions."

"Visions of what, Caroline?"

"Of you being installed at Deverills and releasing me! I do want a little flutter into the unknown, Cicely, and during the short time we were in Boulogne I very nearly said to mother I would stop there and lend a hand at one of the canteens. I couldn't nurse, I'm too heavy-handed and too susceptible to other folk's pain, though perhaps you wouldn't think it to look at me. But I could stand for hours behind a counter and never feel tired, and I've no nonsense about my hands or about wearing unbecoming clothes, so I might be useful."

"So you made a little conspiracy to present me with your duties at Deverills and stop in France instead!" said Cicely, her lips curving in a faint smile.

"You are not afraid that I might create disasters which would horrify your mother and make her rue the day she ever saw me?"

"No, I'm not afraid of anything. At first when I saw how pretty you were, I confess I had qualms, and wondered how Giles ever dared. I'm wondering that still. If it isn't too painful for you to talk about, could you tell me how it ever came to pass?"

"It can be quickly told. There was no leading up to it of any sort, though we had often talked together. It came upon me with such suddenness!—I had only fifteen minutes to make up my mind, and M. Lemoine and the dear old curé were both very keen on it. I was pushed into it, that's all, and that is why I don't think I should be held responsible for consequences."

"Here's someone coming."

"It is Kane, one of our orderlies. He was a great friend of your brother. Caroline, may I introduce him?"

Caroline, whose wits were nimble enough, and her ear quick to catch the different inflections of a voice in which she happened to be interested, rose to her feet to be ready to greet the approaching figure whose name she had already heard in connection with her brother's experiences in France.

She put away in a private niche of her mind certain small signs and portents which convinced her that Dennis Kane was a personality of deep interest to her new sister-in-law. Cicely, indeed, would have been surprised had she known how swift and accurate was the conclusion to which Caroline had arrived.

Cicely herself was as yet unaware of her growing sentiment towards the Irish patriot. She would have been very much astonished, and probably slightly indignant, had anyone suggested that her reluctance to leave Cœur la Reine had anything to do with him.

"Come here, Mr. Kane. This is Lord Steering's sister—Miss Chievely. She has come with her mother a long way to hear about him. I am sure you could tell her all the things she most wants to know, so I think I will leave you and run back to the château.

Caroline turned to him eagerly.

In a moment they were deep in conversation, or, at least, Caroline was, ready with her questions, which Kane did his best to answer or to parry, as seemed necessary or convenient.

Cicely did not immediately return to the château. She made pause when quite beyond sight and hearing of the pair she had left, and stood on the little bridge which spanned the stream and which gave its particular charm to the grounds of Cœur la Reine.

The flutter which had betrayed itself on her features had set her heart beating in an odd, spasmodic way that disturbed her mightily.

"Now, if that sort of thing is in the air, Cicely, my dear," she observed to herself viciously, "the sooner you go and bury yourself in the impenetrable seclusion of Deverills the better."

Oddly enough, it was that brief experience which reconciled the girl more than anything else to the next step in her career. From that moment she altogether ceased to protest or comment about returning to England with Lady Steering and Caroline. Nay, it almost appeared to her aunt as if she were feverishly anxious for the day to come. Their departure was fixed for Friday morning, and they were to be driven to Boulogne in Lady Winyard's car.

During the intervening days Cicely had studiously avoided Dennis Kane, keeping away from every part of the house or grounds where she would be at all likely to encounter him. At the last moment, however, feeling that she could not be guilty of such

strange rudeness, especially as it might be misconstrued by even the least self-conscious of men, Cicely sat down and wrote him a brief little note of good wishes and farewell.

She found some difficulty in writing a note which would be perfectly non-committal but at the same time convey all she wished to be conveyed.

After various attempts, she produced this result :

"DEAR MR. KANE,—As we don't happen to have met during the last forty-eight hours, I am writing to say good-bye, as I am returning to England with Lady Steering. It is very doubtful whether I shall be allowed to come back to Cœur la Reine, as circumstances seem to be stronger in life than we who are their puppets or their sport.

"I felt I could not leave without saying good-bye, and thanking you for your kindness to me while I have been here, also for all the good advice you have given me. I have the kind of feeling that I shall need it more in the place to which I am going, and where it can't reach me. If we never meet again, may I express the hope that your own country may, before the war is over, claim the service and the devotion you are so willing to bestow on France. Of course, I am aware that the aims and the cause are identical; but still, you are British born, and ought to fight under the Union Jack.

"Please forgive me for harping on that old string, and believe me to be—Yours most sincerely,

"CICELY STEERING."

She had hesitated quite a while before she could bring herself to write her new name for the first time, but managed it at last. She sealed it with her own private seal, on the delicate mauve sealing-wax which her aunt used in such profusion, and gave it to one

of the nurses whom she knew she could trust to see it delivered.

No sooner was it out of her hands, however, than Lady Winyard burst into the room, exhibiting signs of active irritation.

"Here, that tiresome Benthall has developed a temperature!" she cried in tones of genuine vexation. "How you are to be got into Boulogne Heaven alone knows."

"Something must be got, now that all the packing is done and Lady Steering and Caroline are sitting ready," said Cicely. "Oh, why did I not learn to handle a motor instead of going in for that silly V.A. training?"

At another time Lady Winyard might have joined issue with her at once, for she loved nothing better than to get hold of any theme, however trivial, and discuss it to rags.

"But for the silly V.A., as you call it, you never would have been here, my child, and don't forget it. Even if you had learned the handling of a car, don't for a moment think that I would have trusted you with my car or with myself!"

Her aunt's drastic statements never ruffled Cicely in the least.

"I'd have got you through, and would not have smashed the Idol," she said calmly. Then, as they regarded each other for a few moments in perplexed dismay, Cicely said on the spur of the moment: "Why not ask Kane to drive us in? He's an expert motorist."

"Is he? Are you sure? How do you know?"

"He didn't tell me, you may be sure. It was—it was poor Steering. According to him, there is nothing on earth Kane can't do, and do thoroughly well."

"Model of all the virtues and accomplishments. Well, where is this paragon to be found? Could you

find him, do you think, as you always seem to know where that sort of person is? ”

Cicely laughed weakly as she shook her head.

“Really, Aunt Georgie, if I were a thin-skinned person I might take offence a hundred times a day! Send one of the men. I haven’t seen him to speak to for two whole days.”

“You haven’t—even to say good-bye?” said Lady Winyard, looking into her niece’s face rather keenly.

“Not even to say good-bye! He doesn’t seem to have been about, and there wasn’t time to seek him out.”

“That seems rather odd, after all; you have been very friendly with the man, and he has shown you a lot of kindness. He may easily think you a snob. Aren’t you afraid he thinks you a snob, Cicely?”

Cicely shook her head.

“Oh, no. Besides, would it matter, Aunt Georgie? It isn’t likely we shall ever meet again. Kane will pass, with the rest of the life here. Dear Cœur la Reine, how I shall miss it all! It simply won’t bear thinking of.”

CHAPTER XI

KANE was duly found after lapse of some little time, and indicated his willingness to take Benthall’s duties on himself.

He preserved the utmost decorum of demeanour under the fire of Lady Winyard’s instructions and warnings, and expressed hopes that he would get them through to the port without disaster, and be able to bring back the car intact.

"You know what it is in this backwater witho a car, Kane," she said sharply. "You are quite su you *do* understand all about it?"

"I think I can manage it, Lady Winyard," Kar replied in his quiet, rather convincing manner. "Yo may rest assured I wouldn't attempt it unless I *di* understand."

"Well, it would seem the limit of folly otherwise for though it behaves like an angel with Benthall, i could easily behave like the other sort with an ignoran or stupid chauffeur. Well, I must trust you, and fortunately the roads are very good. The traffic gets rather awful when you get nearer the lines of communication. You will have to be very careful, Kane."

"Yes, Madam, I will be very careful," he replied as he lifted up the bonnet of the car and swept his eye over its internal mechanism.

Somehow, that little incident reassured Lady Winyard. She had seen the august Benthall and other expensive chauffeurs do the like, and concluded that it was a habit of the highly skilled.

"But you won't forget that you are carrying a valuable cargo?" she went on, in a sweeter, less agitated voice. "Two Lady Steerings—and much depends on their getting safely back to England."

"I understand. You may trust them to me, Lady Winyard, and the car shall be brought back none the worse, if I have any luck at all," Kane assured her with complete gravity, and stood at attention as the ladies appeared on the terrace of the château.

Cicely came last, carrying the small attaché case without which no genuine war-worker ever dreams of sallying forth on any important or unimportant journey. She wore her uniform, and the summer wind parted her cloak, revealing the Red Cross on the snowy bosom of the apron she wore with so much grace.

Kane stood there as if carved in stone, looking the

part of the respectful military chauffeur, though no detail of that winsome presence was lost upon him. Cicely threw him a glance of recognition, and then walked to the front of the car.

"Aunt Georgie, I am going to ride in front with Mr. Kane. That is, if Lady Steering won't think it rude," she added.

Kane suffered no expression of satisfaction or the reverse to appear on his impassive face. There was ample room on the wide front seat of the big car for Cicely to look quite small in the farther corner, and she sat there demurely enough, after the farewells had been said, and the engine, answering to the skilful touch, bore them slowly at first down the tree-lined avenue out to the white road between the poplars.

It was white and straight and dusty; there was nothing to hinder their progress. Except when a convoy churned up the dust, there was very little traffic on the bit of road which led from the main road to the village of Fouches.

They had left it far behind, and Cicely had ceased to watch the brown, sinuous hands on the steering-wheel, before a single word passed between them. She spoke, then, in a still small voice, with a smile dimpling the cleft in her chin.

"We're not very lively, are we? I suppose one ought not to speak to the man at the wheel, but you're no novice at this game. I believe you could steer her with your eyes shut."

"On a quiet road like this that would be easy enough. She's a beauty, and true to her name."

"Have you driven a Silent Knight before?"

"Never. I haven't had one at all of my own, but I shall some day, if I live."

"Don't you expect to live, then?" asked Cicely innocently.

He replied by a shrug of his shoulders.

"Who can tell? In war-time, here to-day and gone to-morrow is the order of the hour."

"You sound rather as if you didn't mind."

"I don't. Human life was never cheaper—nor dearer," he answered. "It has passed from the ideal stage and become a mere chance."

"But the ideal remains," said Cicely quickly. "That is why it has become what you call a mere chance. Either the ideal or the idealists must go under. Those who are left pass the verdict and will say whether it is worth while."

She spoke with a passion which surprised the man at her side, and he turned to flash an inquiring glance at her. He had loved her for the beauty of her face, for her youth, her exquisite feminine charm, because she represented in fact the inaccessible star for such as he. Now she was giving him a little glimpse of her soul. Being what he was, the appeal went home.

"I think it will be worth while," he answered simply. "In that hope alone we fight on."

"Tell me," she said, sitting forward and with a gesture bringing herself nearer to him, "are you, too, leaving *Cœur la Reine*?"

"Yes; next week. They keep issuing fresh orders, and contradicting them—a way they have in the army!"

"Back to the Legion?"

He nodded.

"I don't want you to go there. Fight for England," said Cicely passionately.

"It is all one, surely—France and England, the common bond, the one ideal. Does it matter under which flag?" he answered gravely.

"Is the flag the obstacle?" asked Cicely, thinking of what lay behind this man's sombre eyes—centuries of oppression and wrong and injustice, which brooding over had magnified a thousandfold. Cicely had

heard the Irish problem discussed at her own home, and in other places, generally with a sort of hopeless tolerance which promised no prospect of betterment for that distressful country. But she had never talked till now with a real Irishman who took his country seriously, and Kane was a figure to make a powerful appeal to a girl's quick and ardent imagination.

"What do you think about my going back to England?" she asked, with a sudden inconsequence. "Myself, I think it is a silly journey, and nothing will come of it."

"Why should nothing come of it?" he
"You will take up the duties of a great
I am sure will discharge them well."

He spoke quietly and soberly, but the words angered Cicely.

"You needn't poke fun at me! I know what you think about great estates and the duties attached thereto. You think they have no right to exist. You are a revolutionary out and out. I've discovered that much about you, Mr. Kane."

"Have you? I don't know it myself yet."

"Don't you? Why, the very first time I saw you I detected the smouldering rebellion in your eyes. You are a soldier of the Legion as a protest against authority. What I would like to know is, how much of it is real and how much of it is pose?"

She spoke with a kind of reckless candour which amazed herself. She wanted to wound the man by her side, to break up his studied gloom, to watch him wince under the lash of her words; above all, to provoke him to explanation or self-defence.

The motive? Ah, that she could not have easily told. Beyond doubt her own heart was aching at the prospect of parting from him, possibly—nay, probably—for ever. She knew that the chances for the soldiers of the Legion were very slender, and he, she felt sure,

was one who would be first in the assault, no matter what the odds.

"I suppose we are all poseurs more or less," he answered, without so much as a flicker of the eyelid. "But the day comes and the hour when we are stripped and bare, and there is no longer any doubt."

"What an unpleasant suggestion!" said the girl, shrugging her graceful shoulders. "You would welcome that?"

"Welcome it? I don't know. I shan't go out of my way to avoid it, anyhow."

"I would rather like to be there when your hour comes," she said wickedly. "I'm sure there must be a very interesting picture beneath your mask."

"My mask?" he repeated, and turned to her, his lips twitching in a rather queer smile. "So you are conscious of the mask?"

"I think you pride yourself on being different from other people. I'm not sure that I didn't like your poor friend's way better. He was no poseur, at least. He permitted people to take their own estimate of him."

"He is fortunate in having won your approval and respect," said Kane formally, and somehow these words so enraged Cicely that she could have shaken him. He suddenly made her feel very, very young and childish, and incredibly foolish. How could he tell that it was because her heart was sore that she spoke words like these? And, even if he knew, would he care?

So this odd acquaintance narrowed itself down to the same old limits, and the world, as of yore, contained only one man and woman, tormenting themselves and one another.

When she did not answer for a long time, he turned and looked at her, but her face was turned away, and he only saw the adorable curve of her chin and the tip of a pink ear showing under the gold of her hair.

"I see clouds of dust in the distance," she said suddenly. "Either a convoy or transport."

"Transport," he said briefly. "Don't you think you'd better go inside? You'll be smothered with dust otherwise, and we must draw up, anyhow, till the entire string passes. That's the rule of the military road."

"Must we? Yes, of course, I'll go inside. It was silly of me to come on this seat. I thought I'd like it."

"But you haven't?"

"No, I've hated it. Thank you, don't trouble to get down. I can easily step over you."

He ignored the suggestion, and, slowing in to the side, jumped on to the roadway. But he did not offer to help her in any way.

The two ladies inside, slightly alarmed at the stoppage—for a little nervousness of France in war-time was part of their present outlook on life—sat forward at the opening of the door.

"It's only me changing over to escape being smothered in dust," said Cicely in a hard, cheerful voice. "There's an immense line of transport ahead. It won't turn aside, worse luck, for I think I know where it is going. We shall have to close all the windows, and poor Aunt Georgie will be in despair when she sees how filthy the car is, more especially as Benthall won't be able to clean it. I don't suppose you would stoop to that?"

"Oh, yes, Lady Steering," said Kane with a kind of laboured politeness. "I shall see that Lady Winyard has no occasion to find fault with my handling of the car. I will restore it to her in excellent condition."

"Don't be too sure. We haven't got over the last bumpy miles to Boulogne yet. And then you have to come back! True, you'll be rid of your irksome load."

She flung the last words at him as she climbed nimbly to her little folding seat, with her back to the

engine, but after they had started off again she adjusted the seat so that she looked straight out on the nape of his neck and the curve of his fine head. And what were her thoughts? She hated herself for picturing him as a boy, with no mother to kiss that neck when it was soft and dimpled with the beauty of childhood.

"He seems a very careful driver," observed Lady Steering from the depths of her soft cushions, "and a very interesting man. I had a long talk with him last night, and he comforted me very much about my son."

"Did he tell you much about himself?" asked Cicely, looking round into the soft, sweet face.

"Not so very much. Apparently he has had a hard life. But quite a gentleman—don't you think so, dear?"

"That depends. I'm afraid to be quite a gentleman, as we understand it, is the very last pronouncement friend Kane wishes made upon him. It would top all the wrongs, I'm afraid, Lady Steering."

"Dear me, what an extraordinary idea! I have invited him to Deverills, and he has promised to come when the war is over."

"When the war is over! Will it ever be?" asked Cicely. "And next week he is going back to the line. The Foreign Legion is going to bolster up a weak part in the Verdun sector, he says, and I don't really see much chance of his ever reaching Deverills."

"My dear," said Lady Steering in a shocked voice, "don't anticipate death! It is bad enough when it comes."

They were detained for three-quarters of an hour at a cross-road, in order to allow the passage of a long line of transport wagons, followed by a company of soldiers. It thrilled the two who had lately arrived from England, and made them feel that they were really in the war zone. The same picture could be

seen in the vicinity of any big camp in England, but there were no camps near enough to Much Havers to make such scenes familiar to the inhabitants.

At last the whole enormous train passed by, and Kane, without a backward glance, made the car jump forward, and they were off again, skimming the road like a bird, though the surface was much less smooth than it had been on the quieter lanes in the vicinity of Fouches. About half-past three o'clock in the afternoon they passed the last barrier before Boulogne, and were driven to the Hôtel Cambon, where they had put up on their arrival in France. It was their intention to sail by the boat next day.

The moment he had deposited them at their hotel, Kane prepared to drive away.

"Won't you come in and have a meal of some sort?" said Lady Steering, anxiously and kindly. "It's a long drive back."

"Thank you, Madame. It is a long way back, and I think we shall have a thunderstorm. If you will excuse me, I shall be going now. I am accustomed to long fasts."

"You must come in and have a cup of tea, at least," said Cicely impetuously. "Indeed, I insist upon it! They know how to make tea here. Aunt Georgie and I were quite agreeably surprised when we came out."

Kane looked at his watch, then at the overcast sky, and shook his head.

"I ought not to stay. Indeed, I can't. Good-bye, Lady Steering."

The elder lady, thinking he was addressing her, shook hands with him warmly, spoke a few kind words, reminding him of his promise to visit Deverills, and then entered the hotel, followed by Caroline, who had the feeling that Cicely had something she wished to say to Kane out of their hearing.

She had some difficulty in saying it, and her face flushed as she got out the words bravely.

"I want to say—I'm sorry for all the horrid things I've said to-day and other days," she began hurriedly; "and when you get back to Cœur la Reine, someone will give you a note I wrote to say good-bye to you. I hadn't time to retrieve it before we started out. Just tear it up, will you—without reading it, I mean?"

"I am hardly likely to do that," he answered quietly.

"Oh, but you must! I had no right to say the things I did say in it—about fighting under the Union Jack, and all that, just as I said on the way to Boulogne to-day. After all, it is your business."

"Yes, you are right—it is my business," he answered in the same quiet voice which exasperated Cicely, and made her feel cheap.

"Well, we needn't stand here, I suppose. You don't want to realise that I only wish to part friends, and not to have you think I am a horrid, interfering, selfish little beast."

He started at this outburst, which was certainly a most unusual one on Cicely's part.

"Please say no more," he answered with a strange stiffness. "I quite understand, and it is not—it is not good for me to hear any more."

His face had reddened too, and Cicely was glad of it.

"Lady Steering has invited you to Deverills. Will you come?" she asked.

"I don't know. I have not had much use for England lately."

"Oh, but you might get to understand her better. I should be pleased to see you at Deverills. I'm only going on sufferance myself, but I shall look forward to seeing you there."

"If anything would bring me, that would. I will write it down."

"On what? Do you keep a diary?" asked Cicely interestedly.

"No—except on the tablets of memory."

"Gracious! How overloaded these poor tablets must be! I can never remember anything—except the things I want to forget."

He could not forbear a smile at the haste and passion with which she spoke. She was like an electric spark, or a live torch, beside which it was impossible for a man to remain indifferent or unmoved.

"I see you are simply dying to get away. Well, good-bye, Mr. Kane. Perhaps we *shall* meet again. Some day, when I am very rich and have nothing on this earth to do—a state of body and mind which will never come to pass—I shall take a trip to Ireland and find out for myself what is the matter with your country—and with you."

She went, with that, after laying her hand just a moment in his. Had she looked back, as he bent to the bonnet of the car, she might have seen that in his face which would have perhaps helped her to a new understanding of him.

He had kept himself in hand only by an effort, and his face was rigid and dark as he steered the car slowly down the steep street, in the shadow of the old town hall, and sought the open country again. For the first time absolutely Dennis Kane's allegiance to the ideal for which he had pledged his life and service was shaken.

It is not the first time a woman's smile, the lure of her face and voice, have played havoc with a man's plan of life.

They found the hotel full of stranded travellers waiting for the boat, the port having been closed for military reasons for three whole days. No one could tell them when there would be a boat; they could do nothing but remain till the appointed time.

Lady Steering was keenly disappointed, and inclined

to be a trifle querulous. She was feeling the strain of the whole effort now, and consented to remain in bed the next day, while the two girls explored Boulogne.

They came back in the late afternoon, to find that Lady Steering had got up for tea, which was being served in her room—a very pleasant one, looking into a lovely old garden, of which no hint was given from the cobbled street in front.

Caroline's face indicated that something of great importance had happened to her since she went out. After she had poured her mother's tea, and otherwise seen to her comfort, she said abruptly :

"Mother, I've got to confess—first of all, do you mind if I don't go home with you to-morrow? There is a boat at noon; we've found that much out."

"What are you talking about, my dear?"

"I want to stop here. Cicely and I have been exploring canteens and places to-day, and I've found a hut where they would be glad of my help. I want a month or two of it, anyway, and Cicely says she will do her best to fill my place."

Lady Steering looked the picture of dismay.

"What an extraordinary idea, Caroline. I don't think I can possibly agree to it. But what does Cicely think?"

"Cicely thinks you must agree," answered the girl brightly. "Everybody ought to have a chance of doing some real war-work, and now Caroline is on the spot, and has the post actually offered to her, it would be simply wicked to refuse. We can't let her refuse. I'm not much good, perhaps, but I'll promise to fill Caroline's shoes if I can. It is very self-sacrificing of me, really," she added, with that look of particular brightness which disarmed everything, "because I am sure I shall need her advice and help a lot. But still, if you'll put up with me, dear Lady Steering, I'll do my best."

Lady Steering looked from Caroline's angular figure

to the beautiful vision of her new daughter-in-law, and her reluctance vanished into thin air.

"It's all very extraordinary, and makes one feel as if the foundations of life were being shaken, and the odd thing is, one hasn't the power to refuse—one is just swept along resistlessly."

"Destiny!" said Cicely, with a little fluttering sigh. "And neither Caroline nor I are through with it yet."

CHAPTER XII

CICELY, lying awake in her room on the fourth floor of the Hôtel Cambon, fancied she heard the boom of guns at sea.

Usually a sound sleeper, she could not account for the restlessness which possessed her. At Cœur la Reine, where she was on her feet through twelve or fourteen hours of duty, her head had scarcely touched the pillow before she was off into the land of dreamless slumber, which prepared her for the arduous labours of a new day. She was not overtired on this night. The pilgrimage she and Caroline had made in the by-ways of Boulogne, and on the tram to some of the environs, was mere child's play in comparison with the strenuous work she had put in every day at Cœur la Reine.

She sat up in bed at last, and, dropping her chin on her pink palms, began to take a fresh view of the situation. To-morrow, all being well, and no fresh obstacles being raised by the port authorities, she would leave France probably for ever.

Her heart ached intolerably at the thought, with an ache that had something deeper at the source than

a sentimental regret at leaving shores she had learned to love. She was cutting the knot once more, starting out on a new line altogether; and though she had spoken bravely and positively about returning to Cœur la Reine, her inner consciousness assured her that it would never happen.

After much talk, and considerable quietly-spoken opposition from Lady Steering, Caroline had received a grudging consent to remain in the war zone. Every argument she and Cicely could invent and muster had been brought forward, all to be met by Lady Steering's invincible argument: "It may be all you say; I don't deny it. But Caroline's duty is at home. Who will look after the village and do all the things I am not strong enough to do?"

"I'll do them while I'm there," Cicely had said on the spur of the moment, and had been surprised to find that was the argument to clinch the business.

She was clever and candid, and found it difficult to grasp the type of woman represented by Lady Steering—the early-Victorian type, which, while seeming to be humble and unassuming, and, above all, feminine, ruled with a rod of iron. The type lingers here and there still in the economy of our national life, but it is remote from cities and can only exist in a certain environment.

Caroline, so capable and splendid, was powerless in front of it. Strong as a horse herself, she was helpless before her mother's weakness of body and determination of mind. It is not such an unusual combination as might be thought, and it is a well-nigh invincible one. Strong men, ruling in their own domain in the world of men, have had to bow meekly to its absolute decree. With it there is generally a sweetness, an assumption of clinging, womanly ways, an outward deference to masculine superiority which the masculine mind finds it impossible to resist.

When Caroline emerged victorious from the conflict, she wiped her eyes, half laughing and half crying, and followed Cicely to her room.

"Thank you ever so much! I never should have been allowed to stop here but for you, Cicely."

"It's extraordinary," said Cicely, beginning to understand part at least of the conditions under which Caroline had managed to support existence. "Is she always like that? Don't you get doing *anything* you want?"

"Only small things that don't matter; and even then she has her say," said Caroline good-humouredly.

"It is very autocratic. I suppose your brother could not stand it," Cicely observed reflectively.

"There is a different front for men," said Caroline, finding a strange relief in tearing away the veils in which all her life had been wrapped. "There is an outward deference, but an inward determination which gets there just the same. People think the women of the past generation had no power! I tell you they had all the power without even fighting for it. And there is no move in the game they couldn't teach the militants of any sex, nationality, or creed. I do believe they could even give points to the Germans!"

Cicely was drawn and interested beyond measure by the passion with which Caroline spoke.

"I had no idea of all this. I've never come up against it. My mother is so different. She tries to manage us all, but it is quite open and guileless. I think it must be preferable. I shouldn't know how to deal with your mother, Caroline. I should feel such an awful brute if I didn't do what she wanted instantly."

Caroline nodded.

"Precisely. It is exactly what one *does* feel. I'm a baby in arms yet, Cicely, and you can imagine what a joy it will be for me to be free even for just two little months."

"Two little months; but it will be a taste, Caroline; and you'll never go back. Meanwhile what is to become of *me*? What do you suppose will be the net result of my visit to Deverills, even supposing I can remain there long enough to give you your two months?"

Caroline shook her head.

"I daren't prophesy, but somehow I think you are going to be very good for mother. You see, she likes you, and then you are a personality. Besides, your position gives you certain rights."

At this pronouncement Cicely visibly shrank.

"I don't want to claim any rights. Haven't I been trying to make that clear as noonday to both of you? And surely your mother cannot possibly expect that I am to spend the rest of my life at Deverills, an object of respectful sympathy to the village, etc. It simply can't be done, Caroline."

Caroline laughed with a sort of guileless enjoyment.

"Don't you see, dear, you are an immense comfort to mother, because you are so good to look at, so irreproachable in every way? She is going to have the time of her life, showing you round at Much Havers and receiving the congratulations and the condolences of the whole county!"

"Oh! but, Caroline, I don't want them. And I am capable of behaving badly when I don't like things. I do think that in the circumstances the best thing would be to say as little as possible about the affair. I don't feel, I assure you, as if I had the smallest right to be called Lady Steering even."

"You'll get used to that," said Caroline quietly. "And I hope you will love Deverills. It is a dear old place. What it wants is what it never will have—oceans of money spent upon it. Everything is going to decay, though, mind you, Cicely, there are direc-

tions in which money might be saved and even made. Only mother won't listen. Everything goes on in the way it has always gone on, and so poor old Deverills has got left in a backwater. There is nothing really left now excepting the house and the home farm of which I told you before."

Cicely was thinking over these things and many more that Caroline had said during that illuminating conversation, and her brain became very active where Deverills was concerned.

From her immediate future her thoughts flitted once more to the personality of the Mystery Man who was exercising, though she had not fully admitted it, such a powerful influence on her outlook. She could picture him in the routine of Red Cross work at Cœur la Reine; she saw in imagination his strong, efficient handling of the poor human wreckage brought in by the convoys. She had learned to read the expression of his face and to recognise the strong protest his innermost soul was making against the sacrifice and the appalling waste of war.

But she could not follow him up the line to the awful trench, the devastating barrage, the hand-to-hand conflict with the ruthless foe that had made such an onslaught on the peace and liberty of the world. She rocked herself to and fro in the still grey dawn, hearing in imagination, or in reality, the boom of distant guns, and, somehow, the realism and awfulness of the war came home as it had never yet done.

Suddenly she prayed. It came over her with a passionate feeling of helplessness and forlornness that life had suddenly become too awful and poignant a thing for even one human being to handle it alone. She had never lost the habit of prayer, but never had it been a vital necessity until then.

In the grey dawn Cicely prayed for the troubled

land she was leaving that it might soon be freed from the horrors of war, and that its baptism of fire and sword might be compensated by a new and glorious era of prosperity and peace.

At five o'clock next afternoon the boat train, heavily laden, arrived at Charing Cross, and was met by anxious crowds who for several days had suffered the sickness of hope deferred. Cicely had wired from Boulogne to her own people, but was in no way surprised that none of them was on the platform. Three months in France had made her fully acquainted with the vagaries of the postal arrangements in time of war. She had persuaded Lady Steering to accompany her to Streatham to spend the night, suggesting that they could go down to Much Havers more comfortably next day, or even after a few days.

"You see, dear, we can write or wire from London, sure that the message will get through without too much delay. They are not expecting us at Deverills, are they?"

"They can only be expecting me if they got Caroline's wire. She did wire, I suppose?" she added with a sudden air of reproach.

"Why, yes, of course. She sent both mine and yours at the same time. Why should Caroline not wire?"

"I'm sure I don't know. Caroline has failed me in this crisis, Cicely."

"Oh no! The time has come for Caroline to—to do something on her own account," said Cicely, her face flushing a little, for she had very nearly made use of the slang her brother adorned their conversation with, and explained that it was time Caroline "had a look in." Already she knew that her mother-in-law did not like slang and that most of the attributes of modern life, especially some that the war had brought into prominence, had pained her inexpressibly.

Cicely's joy at the prospect of seeing her own people again was so poignant as to be almost painful. She had had some difficulty in convincing Lady Steering that it was imperative that she should see them without delay and in persuading her to go out to Streatham for a couple of nights. But by dint of quiet insistence she gained her point. She was a very accomplished traveller, especially on Continental routes, and had a way of handling railway officials with the most astonishing results which filled the less experienced with envy.

Before the train drew up she had caught the eye of a sturdy middle-aged porter whom she decided could handle heavy luggage efficiently. She had brought all her own belongings away from *Cœur la Reine*, which was one of the levers she used in persuading Lady Steering to break the journey.

"I can't take all this Red Cross stuff to Deverills—and hadn't I better get some clothes?"

Lady Steering consented on that suggestion, and at the same time felt herself more and more yielding to the spell of the girl's personality which had so quickly made itself felt at *Cœur la Reine*.

"How I should like to go to the City and fetch Daddy!" said Cicely, as she stood holding on to Lady Steering's dressing-bag, while the porter retrieved her trunks from the pile on the platform. "But we can't, because our drive will be quite long enough. Thank you, you nice man!" she added to the porter, who in record time had secured all their belongings. "Now a taxi—a good one—to take us out to Streatham Hill."

A few minutes later they were inside the taxi, and Cicely, a little breathless, handed the man a florin. She had a royal way with tips, which she always considered well-spent money.

"Now are you quite comfortable, dear?" she asked

Lady Steering. "And not too tired? Did I manage you as well as Caroline?"

"Better, my dear, better. Caroline is helpless in a crowd. Where did you learn it all?"

"Knocking about between Paris and London. I used to do the journey three or four times a year when I was at school at Neuilly. Oh, I wonder what they'll say at home, and whether they will have got my letters. If they haven't, just think of the explanations! It makes one's brain positively reel at the prospect."

"I sincerely hope they have got the letters," said Lady Steering nervously. "In any case, will we not inconvenience your mother very much?"

"Oh no. Little houses have the advantage over big ones—there are usually fewer people to consider in them. Problems are either very acute or they don't exist," said Cicely sunnily. "Sometimes we have no servants at all, but all of us can go into the kitchen and do things. Perhaps I shall cook your omelette to-night with my own hands. I learned to make a truly French omelette at Cœur la Reine, and I'm dying to demonstrate it to my family!"

Lady Steering smiled, as, indeed, it was incumbent on her to smile. Cicely had a way of dissipating difficulties, and in a quite extraordinary fashion Lady Steering found herself depending on her judgment and her prompt activity.

The taxi-driver got them to Streatham Hill without mishap or delay, and just before six the whirl of the motor awakened the echoes in the quiet little cul-de-sac where the Marshams lived, and drew up at the familiar door.

Cicely's heart was rather full as she peered through the window, to see whether there was any sign of expectation on the part of those inside. To her very great relief the front door was opened by her mother before she had time to alight, and she saw by the

expression on her face that she would not need to drop any bombshells of information and that her letter to her father, written at Cœur la Reine on the evening of her wedding-day, had arrived.

"Oh, Mummy!" she cried with a little sob in her throat; and, tumbling out of the taxi with a very childish haste, threw herself into her mother's arms.

"My dear, my darling child, you have arrived! I wish you had wired or written, so that some of us could have met you."

"We did. We did everything! But things don't come. But Daddy has got my letter, hasn't he?"

"Yes—only this morning. It upset us all terribly, Cicely; but—but who is here with you?"

"Lady Steering, mother. Don't ask any questions, but just come down and take her in. She is an old dear, but—but very Victorian," she added, muffling a smile against her mother's breast. "She's taking me down to Deverills to-morrow. She thinks I belong—I'm telling you these things in a hurry, Mother, so that you mayn't make any too awful *faux pas*, but we shall never get the situation quite clear, though we talk till the Day of Doom!"

"Lady Steering!" repeated Mrs. Marsham, holding back a little. "And you?"

"Oh! I'm Lady Steering too. It's the dowager Lady Steering in the taxi. Do excuse me, dear," she called back over her shoulder. "You see, I haven't seen Mummy for three months, and I'm feeling just like I used to feel when I came home from Neuilly in my school days."

With that, they both marched out to the gate, and Mrs. Marsham was duly introduced, and a few minutes later the little suburban house had received the lady of Deverills Manor.

It was the smallest house in which she had ever been a guest, but it did not lack a certain charm. The

rooms were insignificant, but they were furnished and arranged with a fine taste. Mrs. Marsham, when leaving Lesterford, had not committed the mistake of carrying with her into obscurity huge and unwieldy pieces of furniture, which would crowd up a small house and make it inconvenient, and difficult for human beings to find sufficient space. She had made a very judicious selection, and every article bore the *cachet* of age and dignified use. The few pictures were gems, the mahogany had the polish of centuries on it, a bit of china here and there, or of old silver, stamped it as the abode of gentlefolk.

An immense load was lifted from Blanche Steering's mind. It might be poverty and obscurity, but at least it was all dignified and attractive. Her manner was very gracious as she turned to Mrs. Marsham to express thanks for her kind welcome.

"I expected to have gone home to-day, Mrs. Marsham, but dear Cicely insisted on bringing me here first. I see now, it was the wise, the right thing to do. We have much to talk over, about the sad circumstances which have brought us together."

"My husband only got Cicely's letter this morning, Lady Steering. It was, of course, a great blow to him. He will not recover for some time, I'm afraid. When we lent Cicely to France we hardly expected this—and she is the baby. Tony has three days' leave," she added, "and he will be in presently. Ann gets home about seven. I hope Lady Steering won't mind a war-supper, as we had not notice enough to prepare an elaborate dinner."

"I don't eat it," said Lady Steering graciously. "We are very careful at Deverills, too. I was afraid this invasion, especially if unexpected, would upset you too much, and I wanted to go to an hotel, and ask you to come to dinner there, and discuss the situation."

"Oh! that would have been impossible, Lady Steering. Cicely in a London hotel and her home here!" said Mrs. Marsham, ready to uphold the dignity and the claim of her suburban home with a spirit which secretly delighted Cicely beyond measure. All the boys being out of the house, there were plenty of bedrooms available, and Lady Steering was escorted to the largest one, and waited on solicitously by Cicely, who, having pledged her word to Caroline, was determined not to fail in her duty.

But at the back of her mind was an overwhelming desire to take her mother-in-law out of the wrappings of cotton-wool and try to get her to take a wider interest in life, and break away from the traditions that, so far, had ruled her absolutely.

The visit to Streatham Hill, she felt, might pave the way for her good and sound intentions; her great desire was that Lady Steering should be made to see life as it is, stripped of extraneous trappings, and made to understand that the more simply and bravely it is lived the better for all.

She was like a child in her glee, dancing from room to room, looking at everything. After she was able to leave Lady Steering to finish her own toilet, she ran to find her mother once more.

"Oh! Mummy! Mummy darling! Isn't this an awful thing that has happened to me? What did Daddy say?"

"Your father felt it so acutely that I didn't dare to speak to him. Can you tell me all about it now? We haven't got much to eat to-night, but it can't be improved now. It's the half-holiday—you remember, don't you, Cicely? All the shops are closed."

"I hadn't remembered, and, anyhow, it doesn't matter. She eats very little. I rather think they are the sort of people who have one cutlet served on a vast silver dish, with two footmen to hand it."

"Two footmen! Are they rich, then, Cicely?"

"No; poor, frightfully poor. But they are the sort who cling not to one another, but to trappings, don't you know? Never mind them now, Mummy. Tell me about everybody. When did you hear from Jack, and is Tony really here? Lady Steering will stand aghast at his Tommy's uniform. And dear old Ann? Oh! there is Daddy at the gate!"

We must pass over the meeting. Its pathos and heart-break proved the depths and tenderness of the bond between that father and daughter.

When Lady Steering descended the narrow stairs and saw the figure of Roger Marsham in the hall, and felt the charm of his fine courtesy and breeding, the last load was lifted from her tortured mind, and she whispered in her inmost heart, "Thank God!"

For she could hold her head up very high when she took this sweet flower to bloom at Deverills. No Chievely had ever brought home a more winsome bride, nor one who so completely fitted the traditions of the house.

Poor Cicely was not concerned with that side of things at all, but merely with how she was going to make life worth living in the strange, new setting to which inexorable destiny had introduced her.

CHAPTER XIII

BLANCHE LADY STEERING had not often eaten cold mutton and salad for her evening meal, and was surprised to find that it tasted good.

No apology was made for it. Though usually fussy, an odd change came over Mrs. Marsham in the presence of her guest, and she decided that, for Cicely's

sake, they must take the high hand. So the few remarks she dropped were intended to indicate that they did not regard her marriage as anything but a kind of disaster, something to be endured and not gloried in.

Ann, who came in late, sat down to eat in her business skirt and blouse, and was very matter-of-fact, and not in the least impressed. Still later, the dining-room door opened, and a tall, slim, but very handsome lad, wearing an ill-fitting uniform, asked whether he might be allowed something to eat.

"I was at the Oval, Mother, and they didn't finish up till nearly seven," he said apologetically.

"This is our youngest boy, Anthony, Lady Steering, commonly called Tony," said Mrs. Marsham. "He is a private in a London regiment, and is in camp at Crowborough. He has three days' leave. So fortunate Cicely arrived before he had to go."

"Hallo, old girl!" said Tony, as he kissed his sister, after duly saluting Lady Steering.

Then they settled down to the table again, and Tony was quite willing to talk about his life at Crowborough Camp.

"Like it? Oh, well, it's good in parts—like the curate's egg," he answered Lady Steering. "Bits of it are top-hole, and the rest—well, the less said the better. It's got to be done, that's all."

There was courage, cheerfulness, and a kind of delightful matter-of-factness about them all which filled Lady Steering with more and more wonder. She was introduced to a totally new kind of atmosphere and could hardly believe that once the Marshams, in residence at Lesterford, had been bound by the trammels of country life.

There was something of a shock about so many new sensations, and she was not sure yet whether she liked them. But there was an undoubted charm about

the whole family, and, oddly enough, Lady Steering liked Mrs. Marsham least, although she more nearly conformed to the conventional standard which Lady Steering had been taught to consider the only possible one.

Ann babbled freely of her work at the Pensions Office. Since she had become a Government servant and was earning such good money, she and her mother had got on much better and were learning to appreciate one another.

After supper Mr. and Mrs. Marsham retired to the drawing-room with Lady Steering to talk over things, while Cicely and Ann and Tony crowded into the little den half-way up the stairs to discuss matters.

Roger Marsham, most gentle and courteous of men, had never appeared more severe than when this strange marriage came under review. "Trapped" was the word he had used, in a very rare burst of anger, that morning, on perusal of Cicely's letter. He was more guarded now, but hardly more cordial.

"Your son is dead, Lady Steering, but I must say that I shall always regret there was no one at hand to dissuade him from asking such a sacrifice from my daughter."

"Sacrifice? Would you call it that, Mr. Marsham?" said Lady Steering, bridling a little and glancing significantly round the little room, which even the Lesterford touch could hardly make imposing. "After all, what *did* she sacrifice?"

"Her youth and light-heartedness. She has taken on fresh responsibilities, I fear. A widow at twenty-two, Lady Steering, and without ever having known the happiness we have known!"

He glanced affectionately at his wife, for, though they differed on almost every subject, their love had been without a flaw.

"Only a great love can justify such a step," he

went on steadily. "My child was carried away by her compassion for your poor boy, but it would have been kinder to us all, but most of all to herself, if she had held out."

Lady Steering felt for the moment nonplussed. She had come prepared to be gracious, if a trifling condescending, to the suburban household, and in a manner to make the best of a situation she deplored, but Cicely's parents had immediately taken the initiative, and she sat dumb before them.

Mrs. Marsham, reading her transparent mind quite easily, stepped into the breach.

"What you say is quite true, Roger; but, after all, it is done and can't be undone. And Lady Steering could not help it. It seems to me that we had better leave off saying uncharitable things and consider Cicely's future now."

The hint was significant, and Lady Steering was not slow to grasp it.

"After all, dear Cicely has not really lost or surrendered much," she said quietly. "And there are assets on the other side—Deverills, for instance. You have never seen Deverills? I think dear Cicely told me Lesterford is quite at the other side of the county."

"That is so. But what can a child like Cicely do with a large house in the country? Besides, it is your home, and as long as the war lasts she will wish to do national work of some kind."

"Deverills is a large house, and there is room in it for us both, surely," said Lady Steering sweetly. "I am not difficult to live with. Anyone will tell you that I can efface myself. Cicely will have her due at Deverills, Mr. Marsham, you may be quite sure of that."

"We are not so much concerned with that," said Mr. Marsham, still obviously unimpressed. "What plans have you, then? Do you expect that Cicely will

settle down quietly at Deverills? I am afraid it is hardly likely or possible."

"At least, she must make trial of the place and of us. Giles left her in my care, and she will have to take her place as his widow there, for a time at least. That much, I think, is due to the name she has taken."

"Well, well, we must leave her to decide," said Mr. Marsham rather wearily. "I am deeply sorry for you, but we all of us could have done without this complication, Lady Steering. But I trust you will find us reasonable to deal with. Naturally, we think we have first claim on Cicely, but now, as I say, she must be left to decide."

Having got this unpleasant load off his mind in some degree, Mr. Marsham resumed his ordinary mien, and did his utmost to make his guest feel at home in their simple house.

No one was more surprised than Mrs. Marsham at the attitude her husband had taken up. It compelled her to a secret respect, however. She was impressed, as the lesser mind generally is, by the title, and the air of importance which Lady Steering assumed. She seldom gave much thought to the deeper issues, and, womanlike, would not have hesitated to tell Cicely's father that a young war-widow of Cicely's attractions was not likely to be handicapped by what had happened.

Lady Steering retired upstairs early, to ponder in her comfortable bed on the extraordinary vagaries of people.

After Lady Steering was safely housed in the privacy of her bedroom, a family conclave took place in the den with the door firmly shut. It made rather a pretty picture—the father and mother on the sofa, Cicely on a divan stool at their feet, Ann in the creaky basket-chair, and Tony leaning against the mantel, surveying the scene with the half amused, half tender light in his eyes.

Tony, youngest of the family, loved his home with a passionate love, and his mother most dearly of all. Although an attractive boy, he had had no love affairs yet, even of the mildest kind, and his whole allegiance belonged to the little Streatham house and all it stood for. He was immensely proud of his sisters, and Ann was his special pal. She had understood him first about joining up, and had supported him through the slight opposition which his mother had offered.

"Well, and here's a pretty kettle of fish," he said comically. "Nice old girl she is, Cis, but—but to live always with her in the dignified seclusion of her ancestral home!—what price, eh?"

Roger Marsham's fine, beautiful hand fell with a caressing touch on Cicely's bright head.

"What do you think, my darling? Have you any views on the situation, which, I must say, Tony sums up rather neatly, though with a singular absence of elegance."

"Oh, I could do better than that sir, but, unfortunately, the language of the Army doesn't admit of its free use in the boudoir or the family circle."

"Do be quiet for a minute, if you can, Tony!" said Cicely. "I have views, Daddy. In fact, I'm simply full of them, but they are all subject——"

"To what?" he asked anxiously.

"Well, to what I find when I get down there. It's a sort of voyage of discovery, and if I don't like it——"

"Why, then you'll come back here, of course."

"Oh, yes, on flying visits. But there's the war, Daddy, and we're all in it."

She spoke soberly, but with an air of conviction that was at once pathetic and convincing.

"Your mother-in-law will oppose any advance on democratic lines," observed Tony wickedly.

"I wonder," said Cicely, and fell to thinking again, with her cheek resting on the palm of her father's hand. "You ought to see Caroline, Tony. She's my trump card. The only really unselfish thing I've been guilty of in this campaign was when I helped her at the jumping-off place."

"Whatever are you talking about, child?" her mother asked.

"Well, you see, Caroline, a middle-aged woman, frightfully strong-minded and capable, and such a dear, has never in her whole life been permitted to do a single thing she has wanted to do, and when she saw a chance of leaving her mother to someone else's tender mercies, why, she just took it!"

"And have you left her with your aunt at Cœur la Reine?"

"No, no. She wouldn't have suited that rôle at all. She would have worried Aunt Georgie. Besides, she didn't want any sort of duenna. She wanted to get out on her own. She's working at the Blessington Hut, near Boulogne, serving out teas and coffees and woodbines to Tommy—and oh, won't she love him, and he her!"

"Lady Steering didn't approve of it, then?"

"No, she disapproved most awfully and vigorously. But we managed. It could only be done by my undertaking Deverills for a time."

"Tell us something more about Cœur la Reine and Aunt Georgie," suggested Ann.

"It isn't easy to tell about that," answered Cicely soberly. "It has to be seen and experienced. We haven't told them yet! Aunt Georgie wants Ann to go out instead of me, mother."

"Does she?" asked Mrs. Marsham in the most lively surprise. "Who would ever have expected that?"

"It's quite natural, after all. It's a great comfort

to have somebody belonging, in a place like that, somebody you can let go to. Aunt Georgie and I got on most awfully well with very occasional tiffs. She's simply splendid out there, and when she comes back there will be a new Aunt Georgie."

"Would you like to go, Ann?" asked her mother quickly.

"I'm not too fond of Aunt Georgie, but Cicely thinks I ought, and I would like to see a bit of the real thing. Pensions may be useful, but it is not thrilling. Was I to write, Cicely?"

"We didn't arrange anything. You know Aunt Georgie's casual way. She would not be a bit surprised if you just walked in one fine day. She would just say: 'Oh, you've come, Ann,' and ring for Cheetham to bring fresh tea. If you do go, you must stop at Boulogne for a couple of days, and see Caroline. But, of course, there will be a lot of trouble about passports and permits and things, before you accomplish *that*. We'll have to go into it, and I rather think Aunt Georgie will have to make formal and specific request for you. That will take some time."

When they had all gone upstairs, Cicely ran down again, sure she would find her father alone, smoking his last pipe. She had let down her lovely hair, and it lay in bright waves on the pretty blue of her dressing-gown, and made her look very young and childish. The father's heart, soft where all his children were concerned, overflowed at sight of her, and he took her in his arms.

"My darling, I hoped you would come. I was waiting for you. There is something more to be said—I haven't got at the bottom of this yet. Tell me about it now."

"I can't, Daddy. It's—it's difficult. I just had the feeling that I had to do it."

"But if he had lived?"

"If he had lived it would have been awful, Daddy, for I didn't care for him one little bit."

"He must have cared for you."

"Yes, I think he did, but there wasn't enough for two."

It was a quaint way of putting it, but most convincing.

"Ah, well, it is part of your destiny. You will accept it and make the best of what lies in front. I foresee difficulties, my child. Lady Steering is very gracious and kind, but there is a hardness beneath. She will try to mould you into her pattern. Probably short visits will be the best for your cordial relations. Our lawyers are to meet to-morrow, she says, for the settling up of everything."

"Daddy," said Cicely quite firmly, "my mind is made up. I won't take anything from the Chievelys. I don't want Lord Steering's money or anything belonging to him. I have no right to it. I didn't even care for him, and if I took anything except his name, which I can't escape from, I should feel like a horrid adventuress."

"But there will be difficulties about that."

"They must be overcome. And you must do it, Daddy," said Cicely. "It is the only way I can preserve my self-respect; besides, they are frightfully poor and need it all for themselves. I shall just stop long enough to get to know the place, and to please poor Lady Steering by being introduced to her friends. Then I'll go back either to Aunt Georgie or to Caroline. Thank heavens, the war has opened countless doors for the unattached female, and she need never be at a loss."

But even as she spoke there crept over the girl's heart once more the prevision that something awaited her at Deverills, and that destiny had not yet worked its full will with her.

CHAPTER XIV

PLEASE, m'lady, Barnacle to see you," said the parlourmaid at Deverills, interrupting the comfortable *tête-à-tête* breakfast, in what was called the Oak Room. It was really the small library, opening off the other one, and had been used as dining-room by the family almost exclusively since the days of entertaining on a large scale had wholly disappeared.

Instantly Lady Steering's expression changed. She had been talking with animation and complete absorption to Cicely about the departed glories of the house, which had enabled her to forget for a few moments its present embarrassments. Lewis's message recalled them in a somewhat painful flood.

"All right, Lewis, I shall be there directly. It is the bailiff, my dear, and I always emerge depressed and somewhat bewildered from interviewing him. There never seems to be enough of anything for Barnacle's requirements at the farm, from money down to labour. And the way in which implements and everything wear out and have to be replaced by new ones at prodigious cost has made me sympathetic with farmers, though my husband used to say that a contented farmer had never been seen in this universe, and that if one ever did appear the sight would paralyse the world!"

She smiled a little pathetically as she left the room for the interview which never failed to have precisely the effect she had described. A long succession of bailiffs—as Caroline had once said to Cicely—had proved the principal irritation in her mother's widowed life. But somehow it had never occurred to Caroline to step into the breach. It had never been done—that was all. The law of the Medes and Persians guided and controlled the entire destiny of Deverills.

Already during the few hours she had been in the house, Cicely had proved it. She had been somewhat startled by the size of the house, and her first thought had been how foolish it was for a handful of women to live alone in it, keeping an inadequate staff of servants, when they could have been much happier in a smaller house while they drew the rent of Deverills from richer tenants.

She had a pleasant word and smile for the maid who came to clear the table.

"Lady Steering tells me you have somebody at the front. I hope you have good news of him?"

"Only a field postcard, my lady, just lately. He has ten days in the trenches and ten out. I don't suppose you was anywhere near where he was?"

"Where was that, Lewis? Have you any idea?"

"No, my lady. You see, they're not allowed to say."

"I was with the French army," Cicely explained. "Our British lines were not so very far away. It is all very interesting out there, and Miss Caroline simply refused to leave it."

"She'll be splendid, will Miss Caroline, and we all feel we'd like to be there too, doing something for the boys. But, as 'er ladyship says, somebody's got to carry on here. Do you know how many pairs of socks went out from Deverills last winter, my lady?"

"I don't know."

"A hundred and twenty-five pairs, and I finished the last one after midnight, in my bedroom, by candle light! And there were other things besides—mittens, and helmets, and body-belts. It was a splendid parcel. 'Er ladyship had a letter from the Queen thanking her."

The little talk threw another sidelight on Deverills and its orderly, placid tide of life. Cicely, after a few more kindly words, passed out through the casement

window to the stone terrace behind, where a gorgeous peacock was sunning himself on the balustrade. It was a beautiful picture—one of the stately homes of England, though now sadly shorn of its former glory. Had Cicely loved the man whose name she bore her heart must have swelled with pride and joy in the heritage he had been called so early to relinquish, but she felt towards it merely as a casual spectator, interested in the passing show. To settle down and live there would have seemed to her at that moment quite impossible.

Presently she heard Lady Steering calling her, and ran along the terrace to the open window. When they met she saw that the lines had deepened on her mother-in-law's face, and that she was obviously nervous.

"Oh, there you are, my dear. I have had a most uncomfortable quarter of an hour. Barnacle really possesses in a greater degree than anyone else I ever met the power to make one feel uncomfortable."

"Then he ought to be dispensed with, dear," said Cicely clearly. "He exercises what story books call a sinister influence, and we have no use for it in this world, especially in war-time."

"Ah, but you see, my dear, a woman in my position is helpless, and bailiffs are increasingly difficult to find. I have had a great many since my husband died, and of a number of evils have tried to choose the least. They always start so fair, and promise so much. But how soon they fade, and one's hopes with them!"

"Tell me, what did the bailiff with the unpleasant name say this morning?" asked Cicely, as she put her hand through her mother-in-law's arm and began to walk her up and down the sunny terrace.

"Well, he began with the shortage of labour. Of course, most of our eligible men are in the army now. He says it will not be possible to harvest the crop unless we get imported labour from somewhere."

"Sounds pretty serious. Well, what next?"

"There have been heavy rains while we've been in France, and the best of the crop is laid so flat in places that it means hand-labour to shear. The reaper won't touch it."

"Serious enough, too. Anything else?"

"Oh! he wound up with a general request for more money, more people, more animals, more everything, and threatened to leave unless something could be done to relieve him. And, of course, with the hay almost ready, he must be kept at any price."

"At any price!" repeated Cicely. "Now, I wonder——"

"What do you wonder, my dear?"

"It isn't a sound situation, dear. The person who has to be kept at any price and threatens his employer could not be economically termed an asset to any business."

"Quite right! That is how my husband used to talk. He had a short, sharp way with malcontents, but, then, he was a born administrator. We women are so different, and rather helpless in such a situation. Of course, it never was intended that we should administer anything."

"Not even ourselves," put in Cicely, with a delicious smile which provoked an answering one on Lady Steering's grave face.

"Now, tell me what you said to Mr. Barnacle," said Cicely. "I'm so interested. You don't mind my asking questions?"

"It pleases me very much that you should be so interested. Besides, you have every right."

Cicely made a gesture with her hand as if she would place it on the lips uttering such words.

"Now, dear, you must not—you must *not* really say such things. I won't have them. I'm here simply as a guest for a little while. But I should like to be

of some use if I can, and I should most uncommonly like to have a few words with Mr. Barnacle."

"I'm afraid he has gone by now. Why, of course, I ought to have taken you into the room and introduced you. But we can repair that omission later by going down to the farm together."

"That would be very nice. I want to see everything while I'm here. Besides, I promised Caroline. But why didn't she tackle Mr. Barnacle? She would have been excellent for him."

"Well, you see, there was always danger of Caroline saying too much; and, besides, I have always interviewed Barnacle. He would not have understood or, perhaps, tolerated anything else."

"It seems to me, dear, that Mr. Barnacle is the master at Deverills."

"No, no! Most respectful in every way. It is only in his own domain he is inclined to be autocratic, and he is really a quite good servant. He came with the highest references from the Duke of Adderly."

"Perhaps they were too high," suggested Cicely dryly. "But, tell me, does he make the farm pay?"

"Oh, no! I am only thankful when the margin on the wrong side is kept within bounds. I have never heard of a home farm which paid."

"And to keep it going you drain on your capital all the time. I'm only a girl, and my dress-allowance at home was twenty pounds, but Daddy made us keep within it, and we did. Mr. Barnacle should have an allowance, and be made to keep within it."

"It can't be done, my dear. All sorts of exigencies arise. I have sometimes wondered what one would feel if a day should dawn when nothing was asked for, and there was something on the credit side!"

"Don't you see, dear, how wrong it all is, from every point of view?" said Cicely earnestly. "Do you ever go into the books?"

"Well, I look at them, but I don't understand them."

"And won't your lawyer do it for you?"

"Well, he would, but he knows, just as I do, that some things have to go on, because there is no real remedy."

"But there ought to be one," persisted Cicely. "You are just being robbed of money which you and Caroline need, because you have told me so. And about labour, dear Lady Steering—Barnacle must give the women of the Land Army a chance. They are being trained everywhere now, and will be ready by harvest."

"Women on the land! Why, Barnacle would certainly give notice at the mere suggestion!"

"That might be a very good thing. It would clear the air, and the ground; someone else could be got," said Cicely, and there was an odd look in her eyes. Instantly the way opened up, and she seemed to see in clear vision the reason why she had been brought to Deverills.

Lady Steering shook her head, and her expression indicated that she listened to inexperienced speaking.

Later in the day, when Lady Steering had gone to her room to lie down, as she invariably did from lunch-time till tea-time, Cicely, with a couple of dogs whom she had had no difficulty in attaching to her in the course of the morning, set out on a voyage of discovery.

A few questions put to the elderly gardener working about the stable-yard provided her with the necessary directions. Obeying instructions, she crossed the park in a westerly direction, and then plunged through a narrow coppice, which brought her to the open fields spreading away from the frontage of Steering Hall—the name of the home farm.

When it came in sight she was surprised by the

size and importance of the house. Having lived so long in a small suburban dwelling, where every inch of space was precious, and represented just so many pounds of rental in the year, her first feeling was one of wonder and indignation that so desirable a residence should be in the possession of a working bailiff.

It had some features not possessed by Deverills, and, in Cicely's opinion, was a far more desirable place of abode. It was manageable, and also beautiful, rough-cast all over, with quaint projecting beams, and a most adorable veranda running round three sides, about which the ramblers hung in glorious profusion. It looked a complete idyll in the clear light of the summer afternoon.

Cicely, in a short skirt of shepherd's plaid, a blazer over her white blouse, and an old Panama hat to shade her eyes, looked a very sportsmanlike and purposeful young woman as she approached the place, regarding it with critical eyes. Her mind was both active and original, and already there was growing up in it the skeleton of a plan which was going to serve Deverills and the family she had so strangely entered. It was very nebulous as yet, but before she left the precincts of Steering Hall it was to be crystallised.

She took stock of the fields, too, and though the eye was not an expert's eye, she was conscious of an odd, yearning kind of interest in it all.

"I was born on the land. I suppose I am coming back to my first love. Anyhow, I'd like to do something here. I think I'll take my courage in both hands and go right up to the house door and ask for Mrs. Barnacle. I wonder if there is a Mrs. Barnacle? Anyhow, it doesn't matter; I'll risk it."

She went round the back of the house of a set purpose, being anxious to take a proper survey of the whole place. All the outbuildings were in good condition, and though some might have considered it

a drawback to the house to have them so near, Cicely was fully alive to all the advantages when regarded by really practical eyes.

As she was crossing the farmyard a woman came out by the kitchen door—a slim figure, in a short skirt which revealed silk-clad feet and very high-heeled shoes. It was a bright, rather pert face, with high colour and plenty of highly frizzed black hair. She stepped forward, with an air of authority, to inquire the intruder's business.

"Good afternoon," said Cicely sweetly. "Am I by any chance speaking to Mrs. Barnacle?"

It was an arrow shot in the dark, but it went home. She had never seen Mrs. Barnacle; had no idea whether she was young, middle-aged, or elderly.

"I am Mrs. Barnacle," answered the young woman. "And you?"

"I? Oh! I come from Deverills. I am Lady Steering."

"Lady Steering! The new Lady Steering?" said Mrs. Barnacle, obviously taken aback. She had heard part at least of the story of young Lord Steering's strange marriage in a French hospital, and, also, that the dowager Lady Steering had returned to Deverills with her widowed daughter-in-law. But she certainly had not expected a visit from her in such an unconventional way, nor to see her so young and girlish.

"Yes, I suppose I *am* rather new. May I come in for a few minutes, Mrs. Barnacle? I have had quite a good walk over, and I think I did not find the straight path, after all."

Mrs. Barnacle was more than pleased. She took Lady Steering through a little white wicket which led into the front garden, a really beautiful place, with green terraced slopes leading down to a fine and extremely well-kept tennis lawn, on the beauty of which Cicely remarked.

"Yes, it is quite good, but we haven't played so much as usual this year, because there aren't the partners, and I find that girls don't care for it much unless they can have proper partners."

"I suppose they don't, naturally," assented Cicely, at the same time asking herself the futile question: "What is the salary of a farm bailiff, and what is his social status?"

She was very curious about the interior of Steering Hall, and not disappointed with the features which belonged to the house. But the furniture, according to her standard, was atrocious. In the drawing-room, to which Mrs. Barnacle introduced her with considerable pride, there was highly decorated furniture in imitation of the French style, badly made, too ornate, altogether unsuitable for the house or the inmates.

But Mrs. Barnacle, obviously proud of it, drew up the blinds that had been drawn to preserve the colours of the carpet.

"I've been here just four and a half years, Lady Steering," she said, in answer to Cicely's question. "I come from London. My people are in business in London—the furniture line, in Tottenham Court Road. That is why we were able to get nice things at a reasonable price. I don't care much for the country myself; it is very dull in the winter; but I get a good many visitors in summer. We have very few week-ends alone."

The Barnacles were not at all a good type of people for the post, Barnacle, though a farmer's son, having spent his youth in racing stables, and been engaged in a good many shady transactions. He had never lost the passion for betting and gambling, and naturally required considerable profits to enable him to operate in that particular field. He had come to Lady Steering with good credentials, however, and, being a strong, domineering kind of man, had managed to get her under his thumb to a certain extent.

Gertie Barnacle, though not at all sure of her ground, ventured on a remark in the nature of sympathy regarding Cicely's recent loss.

"It must have been awful for you out there, Lady Steering. We were all very sorry when we heard about it."

"Thank you very much," said Cicely quietly. "Were you here when Lord Steering was at home?"

"Oh, no. Mr. Barnacle has only been here five years. We married almost directly he took the post."

"And is he happy here? Does he like the work?"

Mrs. Barnacle hesitated a moment, wondering how far she might go.

"Well, you see, the place really needs a lot of money spent upon it, and Lady Steering doesn't understand. It would be so different if there was a squire."

"I suppose it would. Could I take a walk round, Mrs. Barnacle, and perhaps I may meet your husband?"

"Oh, he's in, Lady Steering. We were just having a cup of tea in the parlour. I'll tell him."

Presently Barnacle, as if divining that he was wanted, opened the door and presented himself.

He was a short, thick-set man, of the bulldog type of face, thick dark hair plentifully streaked with grey, and a very wide, tenacious mouth. Cicely conceived a dislike and distrust of him at once—for them both, indeed, but was careful not to show it.

Barnacle was civil, but not too respectful. He behaved exactly like a man who imagined his position absolutely secure and his services indispensable. Though interested in the slim girl before him, it never occurred to him that she could possibly be weighing him up, and that from the moment her clear eyes looked through and through him his official days at Steering Hall were numbered.

CHAPTER XV

THERE was nothing of the slacker about Cicely. Her thoughts kept pace with her hastening feet as she walked back across the shining summer fields to Deverills. It was half-past four before she reached it and was informed by Lewis in the hall that her ladyship's tea had just been taken to the boudoir.

"Do I go there, Lewis?" she asked, with her sweet smile which disarmed everybody, and won for her most of the things on which she happened to set her heart.

"Miss Caroline used to, my lady, and the tray is laid for two."

"All right," said Cicely, and bounded up the stairs two steps at a time, Lewis looking after her with a somewhat puzzled expression on her face.

There was very little evidence of overwhelming grief about the new-made widow, and the servants' hall had not yet quite made up its mind about the story. That it interested them tremendously, down to the smallest detail, goes without saying.

Cicely opened the boudoir door and peeped in.

"I hope I haven't kept you waiting. I've been for ever such a nice walk, and seen heaps of interesting things, among them Mr. and Mrs. Barnacle."

"Dear child, how and where? I suppose you met them out walking in the village, perhaps?" asked Lady Steering, a trifle breathlessly.

"Oh, no; I've been to Steering Hall. I felt so interested in what you told me about it, and in Barnacle, that I simply felt I must see them. What a sweet place it is! I even wondered why you and Caroline have not let this tremendous house and gone to stay there."

"We never thought of it," said Lady Steering, struck by the suggestion. "We might have done

that; but, then, so long as I expected my son might return any moment, it would not have been good to make such a change."

"Oh! why not? He would have loved the old Hall, I am sure. Didn't he love it as a little boy?"

"I can't remember. But come, tell me what happened. Did you call at the house?"

"Not exactly, though I think I would have done in due course. I was taking a survey of the back premises when Mrs. Barnacle came out. I suppose you know all about Mrs. Barnacle?"

"Indeed, I do not. I called on her when she came first, with Caroline, but neither of us was favourably impressed by her. She seemed pert, and not at all a very suitable wife for a working bailiff."

"She has a beautiful drawing-room," said Cicely demurely, "furnished in the Empire style, out of the Tottenham Court Road. Barnacle came in too. He isn't at all a nice man, I am sure. I didn't take to either of them. It seems to me that they live very well and very fat at Steering Hall. Would you think it very impertinent if I asked you how much you pay him?"

"Not at all, my child; you have every right to know. He has a hundred a year and his house and perquisites."

"What are the perquisites?"

"Well, really, dear, I could not specify them. A horse, for one thing, and potatoes and milk and butter, after we are supplied here."

"I suppose he keeps accounts and submits them regularly?"

"I don't know. I have never been strong enough to go into these things. We must trust those we employ, my dear, or there can never be any peace."

"That's all right up to a point, but surely we have

to prove them worthy of trust first," said Cicely, enjoying the delicious crumpets and the delicate blend of tea, which was the only one Lady Steering could digest. "Anyhow, I wouldn't trust Mr. Barnacle very far, and I am sure you lose money by him. But there, it is really no business of mine, only it interests me frightfully. Tell me, dear Lady Steering, when shall I see Joyce?"

"She will come over to-morrow for certain. I can't think why she hasn't come to-day."

"Is she happy in her hospital work?"

"She does not make any complaint. But I think that she wishes there was a little more nursing and a little less washing up."

"I do hope she will come to-morrow. I want to see her dreadfully."

"Do you, dear? Then you are not finding Deverills so impossible, after all?"

Cicely smiled.

"It is a most beautiful place. I'm sure this is much the finest part of the county. Lesterford was very flat, and your woods are a dream!"

Lady Steering's sensitive cheek flushed at this praise. Cicely had no idea how anxious her mother-in-law was to win her approval for Deverills and all it stood for.

Joyce arrived on her bicycle next day, in time for lunch. Cicely's heart thrilled at sight of her, and she marvelled that two so different as Caroline and she could have sprung from the same stock.

Caroline's physique and features came down a long way from the days when the Chievelys had been real workers on the land, and not merely inheritors. Joyce Chievely's likeness to her brother was so marked as to give Cicely something of a shock. There was the same happy-go-lucky way, the debonair smile, the gay, irresponsible outlook on life. She was but a child yet, how-

ever, with no experience of life, though the new times with 'their poignant accompaniments were providing daily opportunity.

They kissed one another spontaneously, and little Joyce's eyes were full of a kind of wistful pity. She did not know so much about her brother's misdeeds as Caroline; to her he had been more or less a hero of romance, as those are who have surrounded themselves with a halo of mystery. She expected to see her new sister-in-law clothed in the garments of woe, and betraying her sorrow in her looks. But there was nothing of the kind about Cicely.

Seeing the look of wonder on the girl's face, her mother felt as if she must apologise or explain.

"Dear Cicely hasn't got her things yet, but they will come soon. You are looking tired and pale, my child. I suppose you feel the heat?"

"Yes, I do. I'm what the Tommies call 'fed up,' Mother," said Joyce, still looking with admiration and keen inquiry at the new member of the family.

So far she had not ventured on a single remark of a personal kind. She felt the situation demanded it, and yet Cicely did not seem to expect it. She was smiling and joyous, and apparently very well pleased to see her.

Youth demands its own kin and kind for companionship, and when denied will serve itself elsewhere. Instantly there was established between these two young creatures that mysterious comradeship which needs neither introduction nor preliminary. They understood one another at the moment of meeting, accepted one another, and were rendered happy thereby.

"Do they still work you as hard?" the anxious mother asked.

Like some others, she had rather resented that there was no difference made between Miss Chievely of Deverills and the saddler's daughter in Much Havers,

when they started side by side under the Red Cross flag.

"Oh, frightfully ! And Matron is so hard to please. If—if it wasn't such a jolly mean thing to do—not playing the game, you know, Cicely—I'd come home."

Cicely's eyes grew brighter and brighter, and she inwardly felt that the fates were being propitious and playing into her hands. She was impatient for the moment when Lady Steering would retire for her post-prandial rest, and she would have an opportunity to talk to Joyce alone.

It seemed to take longer than usual. It was quite half-past two before Lady Steering was at last upstairs in the safe custody of the maid.

"Let's go and sit on the balustrade and feed the peacocks," suggested Cicely. "They haven't any names, your mother tells me, so I've christened them Antony and Cleopatra. I'm not without hopes of getting them to answer to these important titles."

Joyce laughed, and they entwined their arms and emerged into the sunlight, a perfect picture of youth at its fairest, a sight to gladden any eyes that happened to behold them. But there were no eyes save those of Antony and Cleopatra, whose bright glances indicated merely greed for tit-bits from the table.

After a while the sunshine wearied them, and Joyce suggested that they should go into the spinney which spread away from the back of the house. There they found a little dell near the stream, and sat themselves down to discuss things.

"I haven't been able to do my work properly for thinking about all that was going on here," Joyce confided to her newly found relative. "When I heard that Mother and Caroline had gone to France I just cried with sheer rage ! I wanted so badly to go."

"France is good," said Cicely, with a lingering

tenderness in her voice, "especially when you know it as I do. I want dreadfully to go back, and I envy Caroline with all my heart. But I somehow don't think—indeed, I know there isn't the slightest chance of it."

"What are you going to do, then? Stop here with Mother? If you do, I believe I'll come home."

"That would be lovely. But haven't you signed on for the duration?" asked Cicely.

"No. If you're a member of the V.A.D., then you're a voluntary, aren't you, and can go when you like? Matron doesn't like me, Cicely, and gives me all the horrid work to do, and none of the nice things. I've never been allowed to handle a bandage, or do anything really for the men. You wouldn't believe how horrid one woman can be to another!"

"Oh, yes, I can. But in this case, I don't understand it. There must be a reason."

Joyce's face flushed a little.

"Well, there is. But I won't be cad enough to talk about it," said Joyce, and it was not till long after that Cicely learned that Joyce had won too much admiration from one of the surgeons whom the Matron considered her social property.

"If you are fed up to the degree you suggest, I wonder——"

"You wonder what?"

"Whether we couldn't do something together."

"What kind of a thing?"

Cicely did not immediately answer, for she felt the ground to be rather delicate. Her next remark fairly perplexed Joyce; it seemed apropos of nothing.

"I'm an interloper, and none of you seem to mind. It's extraordinary! Caroline was so kind to me, it makes me want to cry every time I think of it. What an out-and-out dear she is! And how glad I am she's getting a chance in France!"

"But how could we help it? We're just being

ordinarily decent, and nothing more," said Joyce. "Mother thinks you are simply splendid. She wrote to me from the château with the queer name, and said all sorts of nice things about you."

"I didn't deserve them. I don't in the least know why I married your brother, Joyce. I want to say just one or two things to you, same as I said to Caroline, to clear the air. I didn't think about him in that way in the least; we had only chaffed a little, and it was a tremendous big thing to do. I had only a quarter of an hour to make up my mind, but, somehow, I just knew I had to do it. I knew I had to come here, too, though I didn't want to do that in the least, either. But now I seem to see in it some sort of ordered plan. To-day I had some light. Tell me, Joyce, do you know Mr. Barnacle?"

"Barnacle? Do you mean mother's bailiff at the Hall?"

"That's the gentleman," said Cicely, with a faint, far-away smile on her lips.

"What has he got to do with anything?"

"Quite a lot. He may quite easily turn out to be the *raison d'être* of me. Barnacle is robbing your mother right and left, Joyce, aided and abetted by Mrs. B. And I rather think it's going to be my job—mine and yours—to stop him."

"Good gracious!" ejaculated Joyce. "What an extraordinary idea!"

"All truth is extraordinary, I find, until you take hold of it, and then it is the only thing. I've only been here forty-eight hours, Joyce, but I've got the hunger for the land on me badly. Reversion to type, perhaps! I've been dying for you to come. Leave the hospital, Joyce, help me to get Mr. Barnacle nobbled by the military, then we'll go to Steering Hall and run it ourselves to our immense satisfaction and your mother's amazing profit."

Joyce stared at Cicely's face as if she thought her not quite right in her head.

"There is patriotic service of all sorts for women, and this on the land is going to be one of the biggest and most important branches. It's just in its infancy, but as the men get taken we shall have to step into every breach."

"Do you think the war is going to last for ever, then?"

"The first seven years will be the worst," answered Cicely without the faintest smile. "Does the idea appeal? I almost feel that I could do it alone, but if we did it together it would be—why, simply the most splendid thing in the world! We'll establish a school, and get a lot of girl recruits, and make a revolution in agriculture, and, incidentally, show up hinderers like Barnacle and Co."

"Why, Cicely, how can you ever think of such things, and what would mother say?"

"I think of them because we've all got to think now, and to some definite purpose. Your mother? She will have to be persuaded first to let us try, and then be convinced by results. We are the New Age knocking at the door, Joyce. Don't you feel it?"

"I don't feel anything but just fed up with the hospital, and I should like to do every single thing you say. But there's mother—we'll have to get her to consent first. I do believe that will be the hardest part of the whole scheme."

But it proved much less difficult than they imagined. Most lions in the path of progress lie down quite quietly when they are properly faced and shown that their objections cannot hold.

Cicely, who felt herself developing all sorts of diplomatic powers in the strange new environment to which she had come, was far too astute to begin by

quarrelling with Barnacle or making a scene about him. Reflecting that what is done can't be undone, she decided that the past, as far as Mr. Barnacle was concerned, should be wiped out, and that he should be given a chance to redeem his character and build up a new standard in the Army.

She had heard, in the course of conversation with his wife, that he had secret leanings towards active service, and, had he not considered himself indispensable to Lady Steering, would have joined Kitchener's Army.

Cicely quickly found that it was impossible to approach the military authorities through Lady Steering. To discover them was quite easy, and by the exercise of a little diplomacy she got her to invite two of them to lunch one Sunday when Joyce was at home.

During the meal she studied them closely, and decided that the adjutant, a Scotsman, called Elphinstone, was the most likely to be useful for the furtherance of her project. She was never in a hurry about anything, and after lunch, when they had gone out to make acquaintance with Antony and Cleopatra, she broached the subject.

"Captain Elphinstone, I want you to help me about something."

"Yes, Lady Steering?"

Once more Cicely started slightly at the name. She found it difficult to get used to it, and had no idea what importance the mere title imparted to her in the eyes of many.

Elphinstone was a middle-aged bachelor, and his somewhat stolid face gave no indication of his susceptibility to the charms of the other sex. He was immensely pleased at this mark of Cicely's friendliness, though that also he carefully disguised, after the manner of his race.

"You will, won't you?" she asked, with an adorable turn of her head, missing any hint of promise or enthusiasm in his cautious reply.

"Of course; it's what I'm here for," he answered hastily, saying more now than the occasion warranted. Then she unfolded her plan.

Elphinstone was a landowner himself, somewhere in the East of Scotland, and the picture she drew of Barnacle's real or imaginary depredations interested him mightily.

"I don't want to have any sort of disturbance, nor to upset Lady Steering, but if you could only persuade him to join the Army, by going and telling him it is men like him you need," she added, with a delicious little turn of her head, "I'd be for ever grateful."

"I can do it, I think. I've seen the man—at least, I've heard of him. Of course, it's quite well known that he's feathering his nest at Steering Hall. But I don't think we shall have much difficulty with Barnacle. I know his kidney. What I'm not so sure about is your ability to supplant him successfully."

"Is it so hard, then?" asked Cicely innocently. "One can read books, and get expert advice from other sources. Don't be a wet blanket, Captain Elphinstone! And if you are at Collisey Barracks I could ask you things. I gathered from what you were saying to Lady Steering at lunch that you managed your big estate yourself before the war."

Elphinstone smiled.

"That's a different matter from establishing an agricultural school with lady students, and making it profitable."

"But think how interesting it would be, and what a relief from the barrack square," she said, her sweet eyes overrunning with laughter.

What could poor Elphinstone do but fall in?

CHAPTER XVI

WHEN the scheme was first propounded to Lady Steering she looked simply aghast.

"Barnacle to enlist! Of course it's his duty, and I am quite pleased about that. I shall tell him so, though I think he ought to have consulted me first. But you and Joyce to carry on at Steering Hall? I'm afraid I don't quite understand."

"We just want to try a little experiment, dear Mother," said Joyce, who, according to arrangement, was told off to do the talking. "You know how the Government is calling out for women to go on the land. Cicely and I think that now Barnacle is going it would be the most splendid opportunity for us to set an example to the county."

"I still don't understand," said Lady Steering, with that air of sweet helplessness which had been one of her principal assets all her life in obtaining all she wished.

"Cicely, you explain, for you really know more about it."

Cicely suddenly slid from her place on the end of the couch and knelt on the floor by her mother-in-law's knee.

"As Joyce has given me leave to speak, may I ask first whether you would really like me to stop on at Deverills?"

The face looking up into hers was so sweet and appealing that Lady Steering's hand involuntarily stole out to fall caressingly on her head.

"Why, of course! You have been here a fortnight, and I hoped you were beginning to feel at home."

"I feel quite at home, and you have all been simply sweet to me. But, you see, I have been accustomed to

an active life, and unless I get something to do I shall have to go back soon to the war zone."

"But what do you know about the land? And with harvest coming on, too!"

"It wouldn't be quite left to our tender mercies, dear. We've been making inquiries, and we can commandeered Graves from here, and there is another ineligible and two boys at the Hall. If we could get together a band of capable, strong young women, I think we could arrange the harvest."

"You talk as if you had been taking expert advice."

"So we have. We asked Captain Elphinstone. He has a large estate in Scotland, and he knows all about everything. And so long as he is adjutant at Collisey Barracks we could always ask him. He thinks our scheme perfectly feasible."

"Does he? He is a very nice man, and, as you say, ought to be an expert. He must come and see me and talk it over. We don't want to make a foolish step, Cicely, nor to be the laughing-stock of the county."

"I'll take care of that," said Cicely firmly. "And Joyce has no qualms."

"None at all," said Joyce airily. "And I've made a sketch of the most dinky uniform, Mother—made of khaki drill! It needn't cost much. I'll cut them out, and Lewis will run them up on her machine. She's awfully clever at it. And we shall be an example to the whole county. I shouldn't wonder, Cicely, if we had them down from the Ministry of Agriculture to inspect and take notes!"

The enthusiasm, the boundless hope of these young creatures, was undoubtedly infectious. Lady Steering looked fondly from one young face to another, and realised that she must resign herself to strange happenings for which there was no precedent in the wide world.

"Tell me more. Is it your intention to take pupils?"

"We shall want ever so many helpers. And if we are going to do our patriotic duty properly the more we can initiate the better. I'm going under Graves directly, and by the time Barnacle has to go, and we really are confronted with the harvest, I shall know more than I do now. Joyce thinks she will take on the dairy. There are such splendid premises at the Hall we ought to have quite a big dairy, and make it pay too. Then there are poultry and fruit-growing and preserving! Don't you see, dear Lady Steering, there is really no limit?"

"To your ambition! I can see there are no limits to that," said Lady Steering a trifle dryly. "I must have a day or two to think it over and to consult with Captain Elphinstone, and, of course, I must send for Mr. Postlethwaite from Verhemsted."

"I hope he is a progressive lawyer, and not a fossil," said Cicely as she jumped up. "Thanks ever so much, darling, for not throwing too much cold water. Meanwhile we can be prospecting more thoroughly, can't we?"

Lady Steering made no active objections. The scheme opened up such new vistas that it required some time for her to readjust her perspective. The idea of these two girls, in a khaki uniform, working on the land, was certainly something of a shock, but then she received daily shocks since the war had altered everything, and so dear had Cicely become to her that she was willing to fall in with any scheme in reason which promised to keep her at Deverills.

Cicely had behaved with conspicuous tact and charm in a very difficult situation, had been interviewed, sympathised with, and questioned by all the old family friends, and had come triumphantly out of the ordeal and won golden opinions everywhere.

She did not know that the greatest service of all she had rendered to the disappointed mother was in enabling her to hold up her head about her son, whose record and whose fate had been so long doubtful.

"My son who died for France," were words often proudly on her lips. Then she would add tenderly: "His poor widow, darling girl, has been left to comfort me—his last gift!"

Cicely now fully understood all that had passed through Giles Steering's mind at the last, and gave him full credit for the fine feeling that had made him eager to atone. He had made her the instrument, and upon the whole she had no reason to complain of this part of her chequered destiny. She was young enough to put the shadows behind her, and take the good of every passing minute.

She wrote copious letters to her home people, and they had been down to spend a day, so that they were entirely satisfied with what had befallen her. That she was to live and die in the service and for the benefit of the Chievelys was unthinkable, but she was so young that there was no need for her or for any who loved her to trouble about her future, more especially when her present was so abundantly and so pleasantly assured.

A few days later Cicely took another walk alone to the home farm. No one knew except Cicely how cleverly Captain Elphinstone had secured his prey. He had had several interviews with Barnacle, and had been favourably impressed by certain qualities which go to the making of a good soldier. So he had pointed out to him at some length, and with flattering earnestness, that he was the kind of man his King and country needed; also that there was scope in the Army for his powers.

The probability that in a very short time he would

receive a commission finally decided Barnacle, and he laid his resignation before Lady Steering.

It was about five o'clock in the afternoon when Cicely once more reached the Hall, and she guessed that, tea being over, and the hay harvest in full swing, she would be likely to find Mrs. Barnacle alone. She was fortunate; the young servant who helped the bailiff's wife to keep the house in really beautiful order was out in the fields, all hands being pressed into service on one of the rare fine afternoons of a rather precarious and unkind summer.

She was pleased to see Cicely, to whom she had taken quite a fancy. They shook hands, and Cicely was invited to come into the kitchen, where Mrs. Barnacle was making pastry for to-morrow's use. She gave herself a great many airs and graces, and her attire was not very suitable to a farmhouse kitchen, but she was a most capable housewife, and made Barnacle very comfortable.

"So Mr. Barnacle is going to the war?" said Cicely, as she sat down at the end of the pastry-table and dropped her elbows thereon. "Aren't you most frightfully proud of him, and won't he look nice in khaki?"

"I never thought he would go. He has all along said he was among the indispensables, as he was growing food. It was Captain Elphinstone, you know—the adjutant at Collisey Barracks—who persuaded him. He has had his eye on him for a long time."

"But isn't he pleased about it himself, really, Mrs. Barnacle? I came to congratulate him. After the war here will be only two kinds of men—those who were in the war and those who weren't. If I were a man nothing on earth would keep me out of it."

"Joe says you have splendid pluck, Lady Steering," said Mrs. Barnacle—whereby Cicely understood that he had come under discussion at the Hall. "Yes, I

think he is rather pleased, but where her ladyship is to get another bailiff he doesn't know."

"I'm afraid she won't get one. Old Graves will have to step into the breach, and Miss Joyce and I are going to lend a hand. Of course, you've read about the Land Campaign, and know how strongly the Government is urging women to turn out and work the land?"

"You should hear Joe on that, Lady Steering. As he says, they're bound to make mistakes, handling so many big things at once. But women on the land—at least, to do any good! You should hear Joe! He wouldn't be bothered with them himself."

"I dare say not. Of course, it would be very tiresome for a practical man like Mr. Barnacle to bring his mind to that; but, after all, in a way one has to make the best of all the available material. The same thing might be said about the soldiers, and look how splendid they are now! It is only a matter of training."

"But do you think that women have got it in them, Lady Steering? Take cows, for instance; I used to run away from cows when I married first. Their great eyes and horns simply terrified me! All that has to be got over before a thing can be done. And it was a good year before I got over it. In fact, between ourselves," she added, with a little smile creeping up over her pink cheeks on which there was more than a suspicion of powder, "I don't care much about the brutes yet."

Cicely, enjoying herself immensely, sat back, rocking with laughter.

"I'm not afraid of cows; but then, I was born on the land."

"Over Hatfield way—weren't you?"

"To be quite correct, it was between Welwyn and Stevenage. But what you tell me makes me more and more anxious about what I've really come to talk over.

Tell me, Mrs. Barnacle, what do you propose to do while your husband is away?"

Mrs. Barnacle added a speck of flour to the other softening element on the tip of her pink nose.

"Well, you see, Lady Steering, I haven't really thought about it at all. Lady Steering has promised to keep Joe's place open, of course."

"Oh, has she?" said Cicely, and gave an inward groan. It was very like her mother-in-law, and yet it was the only thing in the circumstances to be done. A great point was being made about the hardships of those leaving good billets to enter the Army. "And in that case you won't want to dismantle the house and go back to town!"

"Town? Not at all! I don't mind telling you that though I loathed the country when I came to it first, I simply love it now. There's such a nice lot of room, for one thing, and there is no doubt it is healthier. I thought, perhaps, if Lady Steering got a bachelor bailiff, he might lodge here, and I would do for him."

"Capital!" said Cicely under her breath, for this gave her the very opportunity she had come to seek.

"I came to take you into our confidence, Mrs. Barnacle. Miss Joyce and I have been talking things over, and we have taken expert opinion on the matter, and we think we are going to take over the Hall for the period of the war."

"The farm, too, do you mean?" said Mrs. Barnacle perplexedly.

"Yes. In fact, we are going to fall in with the Government mandate to women to go on the land. And I see what a splendid—in fact, perfectly indispensable—help you would be to us. I hope you are going to be willing?"

"I'd like it explained, please, Lady Steering, for I don't understand one little bit."

"Well, we shall have Graves as a sort of overseer,

to keep us right in practical things, and sort out the work, just until we get the whole grasp of it. It won't take long, because we are two very determined young women, and we are in earnest. Then my idea is to get half a dozen more young women like-minded, and they would have to live here—make a hostel of it."

"Oh!" said Mrs. Barnacle, and her face fell.

"I know what you are thinking, but we shouldn't interfere with your pretty home, though I'm afraid we might want the dining-room, unless the kitchen could be adapted as a mess-room. Now I think of it, the kitchen would be better—more workmanlike, and it could be made very pretty. Supposing you keep the dining-room and your own two bedrooms upstairs intact, and give us the rest? We could store the drawing-room furniture in the attics, for we should need that for a common sitting-room for the staff."

Mrs. Barnacle listened intently, her small, bird-like eyes glittering.

"Would they be ladies, or what?" she asked bluntly.

"Ladies, of course. The other sort would be too difficult. I should be afraid of them—at first, at least. And what I really would like, Mrs. Barnacle, is for you to stop on and look after us, superintend the hostel, and see to our meals. Of course, you would be paid a salary for that, and, don't you see, you could be making a little while Mr. Barnacle is away? To say nothing of the home being there for him when he gets leave."

"It sounds all right, but I don't know what Barnacle would say."

"He will be delighted, though, of course, he'll predict the most awful disasters for us. But whatever he says, we needn't mind. This is going to be our bit for the country, and you are going to help us—aren't you?"

"It would mean a lot of work. But the means would be regular, wouldn't they?"

"We shall go like clockwork directly we get into line," said Cicely, with the full confidence and assurance of extreme youth. "And, of course, we should get a strong girl of some sort to help wash up, etc. When we can't get anybody we'll do it ourselves. Both Miss Joyce and I know about hard work. It was because they gave her most of the washing up to do that she left the hospital."

"Good gracious! was it? I think it sounds rather nice, all of it—your scheme, I mean. Though I don't believe for a minute you'll ever be able to work the farm. What Joe couldn't do without cartloads of worry I don't see how you are going to do at all."

"Oh! don't be discouraging. And, anyway, we can't tell till we try. May I tell Lady Steering that you would be willing to fall in with that arrangement?"

"Oh yes, I wouldn't mind; but, of course, there's Joe——"

"But it can't affect him when he has really gone to the war; and as he is fired with patriotism, too, he ought to be glad that you have such a good chance of doing real service."

"Men are queer, miss—my lady, I mean. I dare say you know that by now," said Mrs. Barnacle. "But it'll be my business to make Joe fall in. He generally does come to my way of thinking when I really lay myself out. It's all a matter of arrangement with them. You see, they don't grow up much—not like we do. They've got to be treated, half the time, like big babies."

Now, this was an entirely new sidelight on Mr. Barnacle, and Cicely, who never missed anything, positively glowed with amusement and delight.

"What a treasure-house life is!" she murmured

involuntarily, but the remark did not excite Mrs. Barnacle's curiosity.

"I saw directly I came here what a lot of management Joe would need," went on Mrs. Barnacle confidentially. "You see, he'd always lived with his mother, and had his own way. Mothers are fatal. They'd ruin any mortal thing in the male line. Boys ought to be removed from them by Act of Parliament—at sixteen, say, not a minute later."

"Then who would carry on their training?" asked Cicely. "They can't marry at sixteen."

"They should be sent out into the world. Landladies, or any old thing, could carry them on a bit, until the right wife comes along. But coddling and fussing with food and other things, unless nipped in the bud, is guaranteed to ruin the best man ever born."

"Oh, Mrs. Barnacle, you are delightful! I think when we are all under this dear old roof I shall get you to start writing a book on the 'Training and Management of Husbands.'"

"Oh, it's quite easy, so long as you don't let them know you're managing them. Now, about this Army business. When Captain Elphinstone came along, Joe was very blustery at first. But I knew that in his soul he hankered to go. The mistake the adjutant made was not coming to me first. I'd have had him ready for the recruiting office inside of twenty-four hours after I'd really given my mind to it. He took a week, coming most days and twice on Sunday. And it was me clinched the business at the last, after I'd thought it all over, and decided he'd got to go for his own sake and for the country's. The adjutant, you see, thinks there are things Joe could do for the Army that would be hard to beat."

Cicely's lips twitched.

"I am sure he is perfectly right, and we shall have

him back with the V.C. or the Military Cross before we know where we are."

Mrs. Barnacle looked as if she fully expected it.

"I shouldn't wonder. Joe can be very set on anything if it suits him, and if they treat him well in the Army he'll do them credit. He isn't a man you can drive. I soon found out that. They say, about the place, he has a temper. He has never showed it to me, not since the first year, before I knew my job."

"Oh, Mrs. Barnacle, you positively *are* delicious! And that book must get written," cried Cicely in perfect sincerity. "Now I must go. And *may* I tell Lady Steering you are willing to stop on here and do for us?"

"I think so. But do you mean that you and Miss Joyce would live here with them?"

"Yes, of course. I shall have to keep my recruits under my own eye. I'll be the C.O., Miss Joyce the adjutant, and you our quartermaster. How does that sound?"

"Splendid! How clever you are, Lady Steering, and what an example you show us! Most women in your shoes would have been thinking of nothing but their own hard luck."

Cicely turned away rather hastily at that, fully aware that Mrs. Barnacle was taking the popular view of the situation.

"There isn't time for anything just now but service, and we have no private griefs—only national ones, Mrs. Barnacle," she said hastily. "Thank you so much for being so kind. You've no idea what a load you've taken from my mind, for when we do get going, I don't want to have to worry about things inside the house. Outside will probably keep us pretty lively. Now, before I go, would you mind letting me see over the house, more especially the empty rooms, to give an idea of what we shall require in the way of furnishing?"

Mrs. Barnacle, after giving an eye to the pastry repōsing on the oven-shelf, accompanied her visitor up the wide stone staircase which, uncarpeted, had been such an eyesore to her, but which Cicely thought quite beautiful, with its quaint carved balustrade and worn steps. Steering Hall was the real cradle of her husband's family, and was of far earlier date than Deverills, and Cicely decided that its history would be worth looking into.

Mrs. Barnacle was further impressed by young Lady Steering's practical mind, though she did think her ideas of bare floors, camp beds, and uncurtained windows a trifle Spartan.

"We are soldiers," Cicely explained, "and we mustn't have a bit of superfluous luxury or comfort. It would be unpatriotic; we are out to win, and must show ourselves worthy of the good cause."

All this sank into Mrs. Barnacle's not unimpressible mind, and when Barnacle came in from Collisey later in the day he found her in a very exalted mood.

Cicely had some shopping to do in Much Havers, which took her a roundabout way home, and before the post-office door she found a military car, which she recognised as Captain Elphinstone's. She was looking at it with great interest, when he appeared before the post-office door.

"I thought it might be you," she said brightly, "so I ventured to wait, to tell you that our scheme is getting on famously. I've commandeered Mrs. Barnacle!"

"Have you? Queer little woman; very deferential to Barnacle."

Cicely burst out laughing.

"I can't tell you all about it here, Captain Elphinstone, but Mrs. Barnacle on Barnacle and the management of mankind generally is just priceless! If you

behave, and really give us all the help we're expecting, some of Mrs. Barnacle's tit-bits shall be your reward. They would be excellent for you, as you are a confirmed bachelor."

"Not confirmed," he said quickly enough. "Only tentative."

"Tentative? What does that mean? But there, we really haven't time for chaff. I've commandeered Mrs. Barnacle as our housekeeper, and now I've to get the recruits. How do you do it? Can you tell me that?"

"We haven't started on the levying for an Amazon Corps yet, so my methods wouldn't suit, I'm afraid, Lady Steering. But tell me, do you really mean to go and live at the Hall?"

"Yes, of course. Either Joyce or I will be C.O., the other adjutant, and Mrs. Barnacle our quartermaster. Sounds all right, doesn't it?"

"Topping! And I'll have to come round and teach you the salutes."

"Oh! I learned all that at *Cœur la Reine*. We were very particular there."

"And when is this practical demonstration to begin?"

"As soon as ever it can be arranged. Joyce and I are going up to town to-morrow to have an interview with the powers that be at the Ministry of Agriculture. Come to lunch on Sunday and we'll tell you the result."

"I am going to town to-morrow, too," said Captain Elphinstone. "Won't you and Miss Chievely come and lunch with me at the Automobile Club?"

"Splendid! Why, of course we will. Joyce will be delighted."

"Do you think she will?" he asked, and a certain wistfulness in his expression opened Cicely's eyes.

"I'll undertake she will. What time shall we

come? Don't change your mind in the interval because lunch at the Automobile would fortify us amazingly for the onslaught at the Ministry of Agriculture and if you'd escort us every objection would simply go down like ninepins. Joys says so."

"Did she? Did she really say that? Well, please come at one o'clock. I can't get off much before eleven-thirty, and I'll motor all the way. I could take you, if you will come, by car?" he added eagerly.

"Oh, that would indeed be lovely! But aren't joy rides for women in military cars forbidden?"

"It is *my* car, and I buy my own petrol," he answered quite seriously. "Yes, it is quite within the law."

"Splendid! Shall we be ready, then, at eleven-thirty to-morrow morning? Joyce *will* be pleased!"

They parted the best of friends, and Cicely's eyes were sparkling as she struck through the woods to Deverills.

"Good morning's work, Cicely!" she said to herself whimsically; "and life becomes more and more interesting. Little Joyce and Captain Elphinstone! Good, very good indeed!"

CHAPTER XVII

CICELY rose in the grey dawn, drew her blinds, and looked across the sodden fields on which lay the chill mist of a March morning. She had had a restless night, a circumstance so unusual with her that she was puzzled to account for it.

In the next bedstead a few feet away Joyce slept soundly and had never stirred once since they lay down soon after ten. Lights out at ten was the order of life

at Steering Hall, and not one inmate of the house cavilled at that particular rule. In fact, the majority crept up the wide stone staircase soon after nine. Long days in the open; strenuous, unaccustomed labour—these are a quick and sure road to undisturbed sleep.

The morning air sweeping in through the wide open casement was very cool. It had a hint of raw frost in it, and Cicely fancied she caught the gleam of ice on the shallow pools between the furrows, where some of her staff, under Graves's strict but quite impartial supervision, had been ploughing all the previous day.

The two girls—the C.O. and the Adjutant, as they still called themselves, Cicely's whimsical idea having crystallised—had chosen a bedroom at the back of the house on the third floor, so that they had a splendid view of the fields which stretched away from behind the farmyard and the outbuildings. It may be said here, without entering into too many details, or recounting the setbacks and difficulties, that the experiment had turned out a complete success.

Cicely and Joyce had thrown themselves into it with a wholeheartedness which was infectious, and though they had one or two disappointments in their recruits, on the whole they had little to complain of. There had been very little shirking on the part of those who, delicately reared, had suddenly been plunged into work of an arduous and frequently of an unpleasant kind. As usual, the shirkers were quickly weeded out, and the little company of eight had settled down to work in real earnest.

Cicely had thoroughly enjoyed it and was fired with the desire to make the year a financial as well as an experimental success.

Only so, she felt, could she and Joyce justify their existence.

But for several days she had been conscious of a great and growing restlessness, a sort of feeling that something was going to happen.

She had dreamed, during the fitful spells of sleep, about Cœur la Reine; strange, disturbing pictures and memories seemed to have been awakened, and she saw faces she had honestly tried to forget. Now that day-break was at hand she was so wide awake that she decided it was of no use trying to court sleep again.

She wrapped herself in the voluminous folds of a blue quilted dressing-gown which Lady Steering had given her at Christmas, and tucking her feet under her, on the broad, low window-sill, watched the dawn creeping up slowly over a sleeping world. Never had her brain been more active, and she began to make review of the past months. Soon it would be a year since she had come home to England. It was just a year that very week since she and her aunt had crossed the Channel *en route* for Cœur la Reine.

How little she had dreamed then of all that was in store, how impossible would have seemed the idea of being settled where she now was, learning farming in earnest and inspiring others to follow her good example! Yet she had no sense of security or of long tenure, rather that it all might end any day!

Joyce, though very industrious and plucky, had become a little detached at intervals, since her *fiancé*, Captain Elphinstone, had gone out to the front. She now lived for his letters and spent every moment of her leisure time in writing to him. A war-wedding had been more than hinted at; it was talked about for June, and then it was quite possible that Joyce would be expected to take up her abode on the Scotch estate.

Cicely now hoped that Caroline would come home and step into the breach. She had hinted at it in some of her letters, but that morning she had a strange feeling that something definite must be decided. She

was not at all sure that she would be able to persuade Caroline, because she was very happy in her work in the French canteen, and wrote delightful letters full of wit and wisdom about her experiences.

Caroline had the opportunity of expanding in every direction for the first time in her life, and Cicely was fully aware of this. Yet, with her feet curled up under her ample dressing-gown and a Tommy's writing-tablet on her knee, she wrote to Caroline in the grey-ness of a winter's morning and set forth the reasons why in her judgment Caroline should come home to lend a hand at Steering Hall.

When finally the bell for rising sounded, Cicely sat curled up on the broad, low ledge, her writing-pad on the floor and her bright head against the window-pane, with the light shining on her hair. Joyce rubbed her eyes, looked across at the next bed, and beholding it empty, jumped.

"Gracious! Am I late again, Cis?"

"No, darling; it is I who am early. I got tired of my luxurious couch and tried a Spartan one. Don't you do it—my poor legs refuse to move!"

She hopped from her perch, a little like an uncertain bird, but smiling a trifle ruefully.

"What will you do next?" said Joyce sleepily. "Between ourselves, it's the one drawback to patriotic service—the unholy hour it calls you from your bed! I'd give just anything to sleep till I wanted to get up. I suppose, if one could do that, either one would never get up at all or be quite ready at any old hour, night or day. It's the way most people are made—quite contrary."

"Some are," said Cicely thoughtfully. "I wonder whether Maud Dacre will be sorry for shirking her job yesterday? Honestly, spreading manure is not a nice occupation, but it's got to be done. The attack will be renewed at dawn," she said, as if reading from

orders for some military engagement. "She must do it all to-day just because of yesterday. If she falls in gracefully she'll be exempted to-morrow."

Cicely was very firm in her administrative duties, and commanded the respect and the obedience of her fellow-workers because she never asked them to do anything she was not willing to do herself.

A cup of cocoa and biscuits awaited the workers downstairs, and by half-past six they were supposed to be at their respective posts to work for an hour and a half till the breakfast horn summoned them. After breakfast the real work in the fields began, and was continued from nine till half-past twelve, when they returned for dinner.

Two ploughs were out that morning, and after she had watched Graves superintending and giving directions to the latest couple in this really difficult task, Cicely went round to the farmyard to help cut up the turnips and feed the cattle.

This work took place in a long shed with an open front, and, being purely mechanical, did not call for any particular exercise of brain power. At this monotonous task Cicely worked for about an hour, and then, deciding that the quantity was sufficient for next day's supply, she sat down for half a moment on the shaft of a cart, her slender arms aching a little under the steady exercise.

All sorts of new aches and pains the recruits of the land army suffered from at times, muscles being called into unaccustomed play; but so far all had yielded to use and wont, which dulls so much pain, both mental and physical, in this world.

Joyce had been successful enough with her uniform, and had induced the recruits to wear the long-skirted coat, breeches and top-boots, which made a most workmanlike outfit. But Cicely clung to skirts. They were short, it is true, and showed the top-boots admirably,

and it marked the difference in rank, she said laughingly when twitted about it.

"There isn't any use being a C.O. if you can't be a law to yourself sometimes," she had answered, and clung to her skirt.

Eleven o'clock was ringing from the distant spire of Much Havers church as Cicely made that momentary halt, conscious of a most unusual weariness both of body and spirit. A kind of terror seized her lest it might be the beginning of real revolt against her self-appointed task. She knew how much depends on the constancy of the originators of any scheme, and that the whole success of any movement, in the initial stages at least, hangs on its leaders. What she was not sure about was whether the Steering Hall experiment had passed the initial stage.

She was confronting this question when she heard a step in the near distance and jumped up with the conscious face of one who had been caught unawares. Then all the world, and life, seemed to stand still, and there appeared before her a tall, slender figure in grey tweed and a soft hat drawn well over his brows, but not so well as to hide his face.

"Mr. Kane!" she faltered. "Why, wherever have you sprung from?"

She strove to speak gaily and unconcernedly, but was miserably conscious of her changing face.

He took off his hat and stood bareheaded before her, and she, remembering how he looked in the sloppy uniform of the French *poilu*, was amazed at the distinction of his appearance now.

His deep eyes riveted themselves on her face with the expression of a man who, after long seeking, finds that on which his heart is set.

"I came to redeem my promise to Lady Steering."

"Then you have been at Deverills! How long?"

"Only since this morning. I was not so fortunate as to find Lady Steering in the house. They told me she had gone to London."

"So they sent you on here?"

"I asked for you, and they gave me directions."

"I see. And as you are in mufti, I suppose you have left the Army—or are you only having a little holiday?"

"I have left the Army."

"For good?"

"Yes."

"It was the French Army, up to the last, I suppose?" she said questioningly.

"Yes. It was necessary for me to return to Ireland. My own country needed me at the moment as much as France—she has fewer friends."

His words sank into Cicely's soul for further consideration, but she did not question them now.

"Won't you come into the house?" she said quickly. "Had you heard of our experiment here, and its success?"

He shook his head, and at the same time looked at her rather keenly.

"I know what you are thinking—that the Red Cross uniform was better than this. But the work is important here. You may not believe it, but it is going to be a success, looked at from every point of view. It isn't picturesque—that's why it is so plucky of the girls to do it, and to hold on. There are four of them ploughing in the next field, and it takes all the wave out of your hair, and makes your face red—but they keep on. I call that patriotic service in a sense even the hard-worked little V.A.D. doesn't understand. She can always look nice; the women on the land can't. The weather defies them. See the wind to-day. Could anything be more truly vicious?"

She got out the last words with a gasp, as a sudden gust caught her, driving wisps of straw and chaff against her cheek.

"Whatever you do, whatever you may be, it will be the true, the womanly thing you are doing," he said, and Cicely turned her head away with a sudden desire to weep.

"I think you had better come inside. We can't talk here, and I want to hear all sorts of things."

"Couldn't I help?" he asked, looking at the great barrow-load of chopped turnips which stood ready for the cattle sheds.

She shook her head.

"You would have to be taught, and this isn't a turnip-chopping lesson morning. Yes, I can get off. I'm the C.O., you know. I've the right to arrange the time-table."

She began to move out of the shed, and he followed, and they went together through the little white wicket to the front garden, where a girl was patiently sowing early seeds. Cicely did not pause there, and the pupil, beyond a casual glance, took no notice. Callers were by no means uncommon at the Hall, and Cicely had to be on hand to answer questions, and interview delegates from other experimental farms, or from those who were anxious to emulate the example set by Steering Hall.

She had not an idea how far her fame had spread abroad, nor how her romantic story had been twisted out of all semblance to the truth. It was popularly believed that she was finding solace for a broken heart by working on the land, and she was spoken of in many quarters where she was not personally known with a mixture of respect and admiration which would have surprised her very much.

Kane found himself ushered into the common room, which was a pleasant enough place, with its cushioned

basket-chairs, long table, and the piano across one corner.

"What is the idea of all this?" asked Kane as he laid his hat on the table and sat down opposite to Cicely.

"Isn't it apparent?" she asked, with a little humorous smile about her pretty mouth. "We hoped so much that it was."

"I see that you are all doing hard and unusual work," he said. "In the language of the people: 'Is the game going to be worth the candle?'"

"I hope it is," said Cicely seriously. "You see, they expect the war to last for ever and ever, and if there are very few men left, we shall have to carry on—that's the central idea of all the weird new things women are doing. What do you think—about the war, I mean?"

He shook his head.

"There was no sign of a decision, or anything approaching it, when I left France."

"How long ago was that?"

"Only last Friday."

"All the men on leave say the same thing. Three years Kitchener prophesied. Some of them think that's a short view. Well, we must just put all our strength into it. You've no idea how splendid the girls are here. They don't really like it, you know, but we've only had two real slackers, and of course we dispensed with them as soon as we could, for fear of infection."

"And you live here altogether? Or do you come over to Deverills every day?"

"Oh dear no! We start work at half-past six, and if we had to walk a mile and a half before we reached it, it would be too discouraging. My sister-in-law Joyce Chievely and I live here and administer. We have six comrades."

"There is another Miss Chievely, then?"

"Yes, but she won't be long here, worse luck! She's engaged to a Scotsman, Captain Elphinstone. He was adjutant at Collissey Barracks near here, but now he has gone to the Front. He has just gone back from leave. Probably when he gets his next leave, in June, they'll be married."

"But where is the Miss Chievely I met at Cœur la Reine?"

"Didn't you know?" asked Cicely in strong surprise. "She's canteening near Boulogne, in the Blessington Hut. Odd thing, I was just writing to her this morning before breakfast, pointing out all the reasons why she ought to come home before Joyce leaves, and help us here. After all, it is the Chievelys' business, and their land—*isn't it?*"

"I suppose so. But you are one of the family now."

"Oh yes, and they have been most awfully good to me. I think I've been good for them—for them, Mr. Kane, not *to* them! Please note the difference. I've just helped them to broaden a bit. Lady Steering is quite changed since she was at Cœur la Reine. She comes here quite a lot, and is so interested."

"You are quite happy here, then, and have never regretted anything?"

"I am not that sort of person. 'What's done can't be undone.' 'Let the dead past bury its dead.' I can't think of any other conundrums—wise old saws, I mean—or I would trot them out. I'm doing my job, and I'm going to stick to it. Now, having been put through my catechism, it's my turn, surely. Tell me, first, about dear Cœur la Reine. Did you say you had only left it on Friday?"

"I didn't say that. I left France last Friday, but I have not seen Cœur la Reine since you left it. I rejoined my regiment on the Monday after."

"I remember you intended to do that. And have you been fighting since?"

"Yes, steadily. I had some difficulty in getting released, and had to bring all the influence I had to bear on my general. But I did get off at last."

"What for? I hope you have come home to fight for England now."

He shook his head.

"My own country needs me. I am on my way to Ireland."

Cicely sat on the edge of the table, dangling her feet, looking at him intently. He was as much of a mystery as ever, and it was quite apparent he had no intention of telling her any more than he could help. But she persisted.

"What's the matter with your country? I hear them saying there's trouble brewing in Ireland, though one reads about the exploits of the Irish Guards and other regiments, and hopes it isn't true. It isn't a time for internal strife, surely. A family should choke down its private squabbles when the enemy is at the gate."

"Excellent in theory," he said, with a slightly cynical note in his voice, "but impossible in practice. Anyhow, I am going to Ireland by the mail boat to-morrow night."

"In what spirit?" asked Cicely, goaded to question more deeply still.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I have an open mind, and I have been out of Ireland for over three years. I expect to find changes, though essential characteristics will remain, I don't doubt—also essential wrongs."

Cicely dropped her chin on her hands and looked at him earnestly. It was her nature and habit to give her undivided attention and interest to whatever theme happened to be under discussion, and Ireland had

become of extreme moment to her. She had not disguised that fact from herself, but had simply accepted it as part of the mysterious web of life.

"Are there real wrongs? I heard an Irishman at Deverills say one day that Home Rule, even if acceptable to the whole mass of the people, would not cure the ills of Ireland; that it is the nature and habit of the people to nurse grievances. When they haven't any they create and nurse them to perfection."

"He was a traitor to his country!" said Kane, the dull crimson rising to his cheek.

"No, he wasn't. He was a prominent Irish member and a very keen soldier, who had been nine months in the trenches—so there!" said Cicely spiritedly. "So you won't tell me why you really are going to Ireland? Your private affairs must be needing a little more attention now."

"They are, but they are of secondary importance," he said, and then rose and stood looking out of the window for a few minutes in silence. Then he turned to her suddenly, with the old resentful fire in his eyes.

"You are as ready to cavil and to condemn me as ever!" he said abruptly, "and my journey has been in vain. I was indeed a fool to come!"

CHAPTER XVIII

CICELY, trembling, slid from her perch on the table and moved farther off with that delicious hesitation which tempts a woman to run away even from the words she most wants to hear.

Kape misunderstood. He was one of those unhappy persons who had been born with a gift for

misunderstanding himself and everyone else. For such life is a gloomy pathway indeed, beset with briars and thorns.

"I beg your pardon," he said formally. "I haven't the right; I see that perfectly well. Indeed, I knew it even when we met at Cœur la Reine. What have such as I to do with a star like you?"

At this Cicely came to herself.

"Oh, I am not a star at all—just an ordinary woman. What is the matter with you, Mr. Kane?" she said, trying to rally her forces and recover herself. Many men had made love to her in the course of her life, but none in this fashion.

"I've always scoffed at the thing men call love, and imagined it had no place in my life. But I was wrong. I knew I was wrong that very first day we met in the courtyard at Cœur la Reine."

"But it isn't so bad a thing after all—is it?" asked Cicely. "And the common lot who shall escape?"

A vainer man, or one more presuming, might have extracted hope from such words, even flippantly spoken; but Kane was far too humble and too much in earnest to tread the path of ordinary men.

"I haven't the right to speak to you like this. I beg your pardon," he repeated, abruptly turning away.

"Other men do it," answered Cicely on the spur of the moment. "Why not you?"

"Because I am not a free agent."

"Are you married already?" asked Cicely innocently.

"God forbid!" exclaimed Kane in tones tragic enough to be convincing.

"Engaged, then?"

"Nor engaged. I tell you, there never has been a woman in my life——"

"Not even your mother?"

"She died when I was born. If she had lived everything might have been better. I should have understood women better."

"They are not so difficult," hazarded Cicely, "so long as you take them as you find them, and don't set them on impossible heights, where nobody can stand or sit without toppling over."

Her heart was beating, her spirits soaring with every minute, and she had to speak frivolous words to stem the rising tide. Surely never had there been such strange love-making. But Cicely knew that for her it was the only kind, the love that was to change the world. Nay, that had changed it, narrowed it down to the primal issue—one man and one woman, standing at the portals of the second Eden, not forbidden even to the poorest and least deserving.

Kane walked round deliberately to where he could see her changing face. Possibly some electric spark from the torch of life fired him too, making him forget, for one glorious moment, the trammels by which he was bound.

"You are not angry, then? In happier circumstances I might even have asked not in vain?"

"Asked for what?"

"Your love."

His voice faltered on the word, but there was no faltering in the eager eyes which claved to her face. When she did not immediately answer, he went on, the passion growing in his voice:

"Tell me—if I had come to you in happier circumstances, would there have been any hope for me?"

"What's the matter with the circumstances?" she asked after a long pause, and, lifting her head, suffered her sweet eyes to meet his.

The next moment she was in his arms, and after a few brief moments everything was blotted out.

"I always knew you would come, and to-day I

felt it! Do you know, I have been up all night waiting for you! That was because I knew you had arrived in London," she whispered at last.

He stood helpless, adoring, before this lovely confession. Love, which had naught to do with him till now, was about to reveal all her secrets. He had found the key to the door.

He stroked her hair, still holding her, and Cicely felt and knew how deep and overwhelming was the force which gripped him. It made her glad with a great gladness, and not at all afraid. Something in her deepest heart assured her that here was the love which could conquer all things, even death itself.

"You say you cared at *Cœur la Reine*. Have you been fighting me down for nearly a whole year? It will be a year to-morrow since we met. Do you remember?"

"Every hour and moment of it!" he made answer fervently. "But is it possible that you felt anything on that day of days?"

"Only that the world had become a different place," she said softly.

"Yet you never gave me the smallest encouragement."

Cicely's low laugh rang through the room.

"Hear him! What kind of encouragement does a man want? He has to find the way. He is no use unless he can."

"A thousand times I tormented myself thinking I had given offence, and that you despised me."

"Never! I thought you very stupid about a lot of things, and, oh, I did want you to fight under your own flag! But of course now you will, because it is my flag."

He winced at that, but only drew her the more closely to him.

"Can't we go out, under the skies, and talk? I

shall never come to the end of what I have to say to you?"

"There must be rather a lot," said Cicely naïvely. "Because, you see, I shall want to hear every single thing about you. I don't even know whether Kane is your right name."

"It is right, so far as it goes. Dennis Kane O'Rourke, at your service."

"Oh, how very Irish!" she said rolling the gutturals under her tongue. "But I love it—Dennis Kane O'Rourke. Quite a good name, too, for an Irish patriot. But now you have me, you must forgive poor old England the wrongs she has inflicted on you."

At the moment a slight knock came to the door, it opened, and they had just time to spring apart. It was Mrs. Barnacle, to ask some question concerning the commissariat, she having been informed by her satellite in the kitchen that Lady Steering was in the dining-room with a strange gentleman in a grey suit.

"Beg pardon, my lady, but could you come to the kitchen for a minute?"

"Yes, Mrs. Barnacle. This is a very old friend, come all the way from France to see me. Excuse me just a minute," she added to Kane, and disappeared through the open door, glad of a moment's respite to clear the air.

Mrs. Barnacle, who had now no use for any man out of khaki, and spoke as if hers was the only soldier in the world, had only a mild interest in the good-looking stranger, though she thought her lady's eyes very bright and her cheeks very red.

"Is that one of them, my lady?" she ventured to ask. "I know there must have been dozens in France."

"Yes, it is one of them," answered Cicely, smiling merrily.

"Why isn't he in khaki?"

"He's been in it two years, my dear, and is giving himself an airing in mufti until his new uniform gets ready. He's changing his regiment," answered Cicely. "We are going out for a long walk; and just tell them not to wait in the dining-room. And when we come back you'll give us a bit of something, won't you? Unless we walk as far as Collisey and have lunch at the inn."

Mrs. Barnacle, suspecting nothing, agreed readily enough, and, having settled the knotty point regarding the day's menu, went on happily with her work.

Mrs. Barnacle had turned out a prop and stand-by at the Hall. Cicely had the gift of calling out what was best in people, and her appeal to a rather shallow nature's patriotism had borne rich fruit.

Cicely flew up the stairs to the room of the twin bedsteads, and straight to her mirror. Her cheeks were bright red, her eyes glowing, her whole body seemed to breathe life, happiness, hope.

She unbuttoned her old skirt, threw it on the bed, and in the twinkling of an eye had changed into a costume of blue serge, which showed every line of her beautiful figure, and gave its slim grace full justice.

"A hat? No, I never wear one. And yet, if we get as far as Collisey——"

A little soft hat of black velours, with a blue band, a pair of white washleather gloves, a clean handkerchief, and she was ready. It may just be added that she had forgotten the orders for the afternoon, though she had arranged to take her turn at the plough. When the lord of love comes along all else has to wait!

So they passed out together into the rather fitful March sunshine, and when they were clear of the house her hands crept under his arm.

"As you are taking me out to lunch I thought

I'd better make myself decent. Is this better than the field uniform?"

We need not record the lover's answer. It did not disappoint her.

"You must take *me* out to lunch, I think," he suggested. "I'm a stranger in a strange land."

"We'll walk to Collisey, two miles, through the woods all the way; that will bring us out about one—or thereabouts," she added cautiously. "Now, tell me every single thing about yourself. First of all, where were you born?"

"In the south, near Limerick. My father's place is there."

"Tell me about it—is it a nice place? Shall I like it? And how many brothers and sisters have you?"

"None; I'm an orphan."

"Oh, you poor thing, that explains lots of things! You ought to have adopted some relatives. It is not good for man to live alone. It delays his education."

"I was waiting for you."

"Were you? And have you never, never looked at anyone else, Mr. O'Rourke?"

"They call me The O'Rourke in and about Rathkeale."

"And what will they call me?"

Her eyes were brimming with laughter, the happy heart of her, singing like a bird, saw only the sunny side of the world and of life.

She wondered at the sudden spasm which crossed his face.

"Let us sit down here for a moment and talk. There is much to explain. I hope I shall be able to make it clear to you. First of all, my people have always believed, and tried to convince others, that Ireland should be for the Irish."

"Does anybody else want it—except the Germans?" she asked innocently.

"We have not been treated well by England. I must speak the truth, though it has the honour of being your country. We have been harried and tyrannised over, and refused even the elementary rights of free-born men. And the appalling travesty of a Court we have had to suffer at Dublin Castle has caused the gorge of all decent Irish folk to rise. It must be made an end of. Ireland must be free!"

Cicely felt the poignant undercurrent of bitterness as well as the indomitable resolve inspiring these words. An intelligent reader and student of events, she realised in a moment that there was far more in this than met the eye. In a flash she understood how impossible it was for this man, smarting under so keen a sense of injustice and wrong, to shoulder arms for England, the country he imagined had betrayed his own. She dropped her fair head on her hand and looked at him with a kind of pitying intentness.

"I feel afraid when I hear you, but surely you have not joined the revolutionary set that are plotting with Germany against the British flag?"

"If I had, would you—would you take back the words which lifted me to heaven?"

"I don't remember saying anything particular," she said naïvely. "But I have a country, too, and I think I would be strong enough to give up for her. After all, it is what the boys are doing every day—they give up life itself. I should only give up what might make it more worth living."

The words and the tone and look which accompanied them moved Kane profoundly.

"Happy country to have such a daughter!" he murmured. "But you, who have the instinct of love and justice so firmly embedded in your nature, would

be on the side of Ireland if you knew the whole story of her wrongs."

"They will have to be told to me, then," she said simply and clearly, "so that I may judge. Tell them now."

But he shook his head. Suddenly he turned to her, the sombre passion lighting up his eyes.

"Supposing you were to hear that I am bound by every sentiment of love and loyalty to my country, and that at whatever personal cost I shall have to stand by her, would you take it all back?"

"Love can't be recalled," she said quietly. "It is a free gift. But——"

"But what?"

"I should be true to England," she said at last, "and we should have to part."

"You make it a condition, then, that I fight for England?"

"No, though that is what I should like most and best of all. I should require you to promise not to fight against her. What is the meaning of all this awful strife? Why are we all in it? Fighting in various kinds of trenches, every man and woman of us! It is to preserve the honour and the freedom not only of our country, but of the whole world—isn't it?"

"That is the ideal. But some of us question whether England has the right to be the champion of freedom until she washes her hands clean of the oppressor's stain."

Cicely, with a sob in her voice, sprang to her feet.

"Oh, don't—don't say any more! It is impossible! Why did you come? I was happy before to-day—or, at least, at peace. I lived in hope. You have done wrong to come and upset everything. You came under false pretences. I thought you were a loyal soldier, fighting for France and the ideal we

share with her. And it is for your own hand you are fighting after all. Now, why are you going to Ireland?"

"I can't tell you."

"But I have the right to ask."

"There are things a man may not tell, even to the one he loves best on earth. It is the test of his patriotism."

"There ought not to be anything to hide. Life is intended to be lived clean and free and strong in the open. Hidden things belong to the devil!" she cried with a passion which touched his own heart.

He looked at her with a kind of reverent amazement, and the struggle between love and imagined duty, old as the hills, in the human breast began anew.

"If you can't tell me, what am I to think but that you are going to betray my country?"

"Perhaps I have not the right to ask you to trust me fully," he said in a low, difficult voice, and the intensity of his feelings caused the veins to stand out at his temples, while the sombre fire in his eyes deepened.

"Oh, how can I trust you unless you help me? You know how sinister are the rumours about Ireland. I heard it said at my mother-in-law's table the other Sunday that revolution was inevitable. Are you crossing the Channel to take part in that revolution? Is that why you have left France and the Foreign Legion—because you are going to join another legion whose record will be less fine?"

He sat dumb under the fire of her questioning, but she saw his very lips whiten.

"Why don't you say something?" she asked desperately.

"Because there is nothing to be said."

"Do you understand the inference I must draw from your silence? It means—yes. You are going

back to Ireland with the full intention of siding with the revolutionists there—in the pay of Germany!"

It was because she felt the things so intensely that she had courage to utter these biting words. He took them quietly, but his hand clenched.

"You have not the right to say that. I believe that no Irishman is in the pay of Germany. If it could be proved to me that they are—by God!"

"What would you do?"

"Denounce and renounce them."

"If you go to Ireland with your eyes and ears open you will discover many strange things. I have heard more than one Irishman say that German propaganda has found Ireland its most fruitful field. Will you promise me——"

"Promise what?" he asked, with both eagerness and pathos in his look.

"Promise that you will judge impartially when you get to Ireland."

"Impartial judgment! Is there such a thing in the world? I begin to doubt it."

"Oh yes, there is. I believe I could be an impartial judge myself. I seem to see everything with such dreadful clearness. I suppose nothing will keep you out of Ireland just now? I am afraid for you to go."

"Nothing, my dearest. My word is pledged."

"You call me your dearest, but you are not ready to give up much for me," she said, both wistfully and wilfully, trying to use a woman's strongest weapon—which is the personal one.

"I love you with a love which has no measurement, and which cannot be plumbed—it is too deep. But it has not obscured the vision, but rather made it clearer. I should not be worthy of you if I were to hesitate," he answered.

It was a high ideal, the conclusion of a dreamer

and a visionary. Cicely, while admitting its fineness, wrung her hands.

"Oh, I haven't patience with you! And I don't know why you came here to-day to upset me like this. What good has it done? Only made us both more miserable than we were before."

"I ask to be forgiven," was all he said; and once more his humility angered her. For she loved strength in a man, and had already thrilled beneath the passion of his devotion to his country.

"Forgiven! Go and do something to prove your love!" she cried, with a touch of bitterness. "I take back, not my love—one has no power over that—but my pledge. I am a war-worker, pledged to my country's service, just the same as if I were a soldier. All my brothers are fighting. One of them has lost an arm and an eye. We are not merely playing at this game. That is why it seems so childish and so futile for Irish people to behave as they are doing—worrying those who ought to be giving their minds to the war, and, beyond everything, playing into German hands!"

"You don't understand," he said heavily. "You would need to go to Ireland."

"Oh, people go to Ireland and come back none the wiser, and much more hopeless," she interrupted, and the tears sprang to her eyes. "You'll promise nothing, then? You will go to Ireland without telling me on what mission or for what purpose? Yet you ask me to give you my full trust. It is a big thing to ask."

"Nevertheless, I do ask it."

"But you do understand that unless I can be satisfied that you are true to our flag I take back my pledge absolutely?"

"You can do that lightly?"

"I didn't say that, but I *can* do it. I am my

father's daughter. If you ever meet him you will understand."

"You wish to part here, then?" he said, and again the wistful look in his eyes pierced her to the heart.

But she had sufficient strength to make answer quite steadily :

"Yes, it will be better. We shall talk and talk to no purpose. If you come back from Ireland with a clear conscience you will find me here."

And with that she turned and left him without once looking back.

CHAPTER XIX

THEY were sitting at their midday dinner in the common-room when Cicely walked past the window. Joyce, who had received her message from Mrs. Barnacle, was surprised at her early return, though she had been puzzling herself over what could possibly have happened. She waited for several minutes, and when Cicely did not come down, excused herself and went to seek her.

She found her in their bedroom, sitting on the broad window-ledge, a favourite perch, and the expression on her face left Joyce in no doubt that something unusual had happened.

"Darling, whatever is it? You don't look a bit like yourself."

"I don't feel it. I've been upset. I can't come down, Joyce," answered Cicely a trifle unsteadily but with perfect frankness. "I couldn't stand the chattering throng."

"But you must have something to eat."

"What is there?"

"Irish stew," answered Joyce, and could not for the life of her understand why Cicely should go off into shrill laughter.

"I've had a pretty fair share of Irish stew already this morning, so I won't take it. I'll tell you what, Joy, I'll have a cup of tea and a poached egg when Mrs. Barnacle has time to get it. Don't let them ask any questions downstairs, and tell Maud she must go on with the ploughing this afternoon if I don't turn up at the coppice field."

Joyce nodded, but her eyes were full of loving solicitude, which Cicely found it hard to meet without breaking down.

"Darling, something *has* happened! It's a man, of course; it always is a man," she said, and gave her foot, encased in a neat brogue, a suggestive thrust forward, as if seeking a handy objective. "I can't tell you more now, but I will as soon as I've got the hang of it myself. Don't worry about me. I'll get over it; but, as the boys say, it's rotten all the same, just when we were getting on so splendidly!"

Joy moved forward, kissed her sister-in-law twice, and without a word slipped out of the room. She was so happy herself with her soldier-lover that she was desperately anxious for someone to come along at the proper time and make Cicely happy too. She had not an idea that Cicely had any secret locked in her breast, and certainly she looked seriously upset. Joyce wished she had seen him. The man who could make an impression on Cicely, she felt, must be worth seeing.

"The C.O. isn't very well," she explained in the most casual voice as she re-entered the dining-room. "She won't be coming down, and you'll have to go on at the ploughing this afternoon, Maud."

"Right-o! And we're all most awfully sorry," said the lady ploughman.

She voiced the sentiment of the whole half-dozen

with whom Cicely lived on terms of perfect amity. She really had a gift for handling people and of getting them to fall in with her ideas. Yet there was nothing domineering about her, and she always deferred to the expressed opinion of another; they discussed everything together regarding the work, though her decision, of course, was final. The military title C.O. had dispensed with the more formal title, Lady Steering, and they were just a bunch of happy English girls working together for a common end.

Cicely watched them all go out to the afternoon's work, and when the house was empty she lay down on her bed and, to her own surprise, fell fast asleep.

She had had a very disturbed night, and nothing could be better for her than sleep, which refreshed her body and enabled her mind to recover its true perspective.

That was Saturday afternoon. Sundays Cicely and Joyce always went home to Deverills after morning church, to lunch and stay the whole afternoon. Lady Steering had blossomed out in all kinds of new directions since Cicely's arrival, and one of the features was that she kept an open luncheon table on Sundays for the officers at Collisey Barracks. When they had been once there and met the two charming daughters of the house, they did not need any urging to return.

As Cicely and Joyce walked together through the little wood from Much Havers church a fine rain was falling, just sufficient to keep Lady Steering in the house.

"You won't say anything to your mother, Joy? I expect she'll ask me some questions."

"But how can she know, if neither you nor I tell her?" asked Joyce in a mystified voice.

"Well, you see, she happens to know the man. She met him at Cœur la Reine. He was a friend of your brother's, Joy; they were in the Legion together."

"Oh!" said Joyce shortly, a great light shining in on the mystery. "Is he the one, then, dear?" she asked in a low voice. "Don't tell me if you don't want to; but, oh, I should like you to be as happy as Alan and I are!"

"He is the one; but there are dividing seas. I can't tell you any more."

No guests had arrived when they reached the house, though a look into the dining-room, where lunch was already laid, showed them that some were expected. Hearing their voices, Lady Steering, who spent less time than formerly in the seclusion of her boudoir, appeared at the drawing-room door and met them in the hall.

"So glad to see you, dears! Come in here, Cicely dear. I quite expected to see or hear something of you last night. Did you see Mr. Kane? I was so very sorry to miss him."

"Yes, dear, I saw him," answered Cicely bravely and quietly.

"And how did you allow him to go out of the neighbourhood? Why didn't you send him back to Deverills? I wanted to keep him over the week-end."

"I didn't think of it. Besides, he did not come prepared to stay. He was on his way to Ireland."

"Has he left the Army, then, for good? Lewis told me he was in civilian clothes."

"He has left the Army for good."

"And why is he going to Ireland? To see after his property, I suppose. I think you told me he had property in Ireland."

"He has a place in the Mourne Mountains," answered Cicely. "I believe he is going partly for that, though I rather think he is interested in the internal state of the country at the moment. Is Major Halloran, by any chance, coming to lunch to-day, dear?"

"Yes, he is. A delightful man, and he loves coming here. I can never be grateful enough to you, dear child, for suggesting that I should try and be kind to some of these men, homeless at the moment. Major Halloran is so very fond of his home, and he seems to have a perfectly charming wife and children. She was a FitzClarence. He told me in his note he is getting two weeks' leave, and is going to Ireland at the end of this week."

"Oh," said Cicely thoughtfully. "Will you mind if I sit next to him, dear? I rather want to talk to him about Ireland."

"That will please him very much, Cicely," said Lady Steering. "Well, I had a most delightful letter from Caroline this morning. I'm afraid we shall never get her back, Cicely, so you will have to take her place."

"Impossible! Nobody ever takes another person's place; they are merely makeshifts. But Caroline is happy, and so splendid at the work. I wrote to her yesterday—what about, do you think?"

Lady Steering shook a somewhat agitated head. She never knew, with Cicely; it was always the unexpected that happened where she was concerned.

"To point out to her that after Joy goes north the Blessington Hut must do without her. We shall need her at Steering. Don't you think that would be excellent?"

"From our point of view it would. But do you think it is going to be a permanent thing at Steering?"

"For the duration!" said Cicely glibly. "I hope she'll come. She promised me she would come back if ever I asked her seriously, and I did yesterday."

"You have made a great difference in our lives, dear child, and I can never thank God sufficiently for sending you to us. I saw your dear father in town yesterday, and told him so."

"You saw Daddy in town!" exclaimed Cicely in tones of strong surprise. "Did you meet him accidentally, or did you go to Streatham?"

"Oh no, we had an appointment to lunch, to talk about you."

Cicely was alarmed. At that particular crisis in her career she did not wish to be talked about or arranged for. She guessed that Lady Steering had some plan of her own concerning her, on which she wished to, or at least felt it necessary to, consult her father.

"Don't look so scared, my dear," said Lady Steering, laughing softly, her pink and white face wearing an expression of extreme satisfaction.

"I hope you are not making great plans for me, dear. The Marshams don't make plans. That's why they find life so interesting."

"No plans, dear; only necessary arrangements. You will be consulted all in good time. Meanwhile, your father is in splendid spirits about you. He has promised to come down for Easter with your dear mother."

"Oh, that will be lovely!" cried Cicely, her eyes sparkling. "How good of you to ask them! Thank you ever so much!"

The girl's eyes positively shone, and Lady Steering saw that she could not have thought of anything more calculated to win her gratitude and love.

"I am so glad you are pleased. Now tell me how the ploughing is getting on."

"Quite well. I think they find it hard work, but I have made Graves understand about short shifts. After all, we are women, dear, and it's no use pretending we are men, or can do anything as well as they can. We haven't got the bodily strength."

This was a sentiment so entirely after Lady Steering's heart that she positively beamed on her. She was still beaming when the first guest was announced—

a nervous young subaltern from Collisey Barracks, who came in fear and trembling to apologise for the adjutant, who had been called out on Sunday duty elsewhere.

He was quickly put at his ease, however, and soon after the luncheon table was full. It was a large round one, set in the recess of a very wide window, which gave the big dining-room a really mediæval look. It had been very little used of late years, owing to the amount of coal and wood required to bring the temperature up to normal requirements.

Major Halloran, a particularly jolly, typical-looking Irishman, who for some unexplained reason was attending to the recruiting in an English county instead of his own, was charmed to find Cicely his partner at lunch.

"Now, this is an uncommon bit of luck," he said, with just sufficient brogue to make his speech delightful. "And how's the farm getting on, and the pretty colleens—learning to plough and to sow, to reap and to mow, and to be a farmer's boy, eh?"

"All right—quite all right, though, *entre nous*, major, the ploughing is the biggest thing we've tackled yet. It's very hard work, and I shirked it yesterday—positively slacked right off! An awful confession for a C.O. on active service to make, isn't it?"

"That depends entirely. But, now I take another look, you do seem a bit off colour, me dear. Now, you take a family man's advice, and don't overdo it. It's a holiday you're needing. Been hard at it since last summer without a break, haven't you?"

"Yes, only one week-end in London, and that doesn't count."

"But you'll get off at Easter, won't you?"

"It isn't a question of getting off, but there isn't anywhere particular to go to," said Cicely frankly.

"One doesn't spend money at health resorts in war time, even if one needed it—which I don't. And, you see, my people live in town, which isn't much of a change, though, of course, it is a rest. Mummy would spoil me dreadfully, give me breakfast in bed, and all sorts of demoralising luxuries which unfit one for the hard path of duty."

She made a pretty little *moue* as she spoke, and her eyes twinkled.

"It's a holiday you need, all the same. I'm getting one myself end of this week. Going home for Easter, I am, and as foolish as a boy over it. You see, I haven't seen the new baby yet."

"The new baby!" repeated Cicely in an awed whisper. "Is there a new baby?"

"Well, he's been there nine weeks, me dear, and his mother is about again. I applied for leave and got it; and I don't mind telling you I intend to kill two birds with one stone when I'm at it."

"What kind of birds?" asked Cicely, with wide-open eyes.

"I want to see for meself what's going on in Dublin. There's trouble brewing in Ireland, I'm afraid, and as far as I can see, it's expected to come to a head in Easter week."

The colour rose in the girl's cheeks.

"Everybody seems to be going to Ireland for the same reason," she said irrelevantly. "Tell me, Major Halloran, do the Irish have second sight, same as the Scotch? You knew Major Elphinstone, didn't you? He told me he knew he should come safely through the war, but he would lose an arm or a leg. Uncanny, isn't it? Do Irishmen know things about Ireland before they happen?"

The major stroked his massive chin.

"Well, you see, me dear, it isn't difficult to forecast a thing when it's been getting ready so long; and

there has been a power of German money scattered in Ireland."

"Oh, do you think so? I so much want to ask you things about Ireland. I have a friend I am interested in who is Irish. He thinks there is going to be a great deal of trouble, and he has gone over—I think, yesterday, or is going to-day—for the same reason you are going."

"What's his name? Do I know him? Is he a soldier or a politician? It's the politicians who have divided Ireland, Lady Steering, and it is they who will have to patch her up again, worse luck."

Cicely hesitated a moment, then spoke somewhat hurriedly, the major listening with an apparently casual air, yet reading between the lines as if it had been written in plain letters for him to see.

"You know I was in France some months with my aunt, who is running a hospital for the French Red Cross. There were two men there who came from the Foreign Legion. One was Lord Steering, whom I married, and the other an Irishman called Dennis Kane."

"I don't know any Kanes," answered the major slowly. "Well, what else?"

"There isn't anything else much. Only he has left the Legion, and he came here yesterday—to Deverills, I mean. Lady Steering invited him when she met him at Cœur la Reine. You see, she came to fetch me to England after her son died. You have heard the story, of course? Everybody has."

The major inclined a sympathetic head.

"He came yesterday, but Lady Steering was in town, so he walked over to the Hall to see me. He told me he had left the Legion and was going back to Ireland."

"I see. And what was his attitude—towards the trouble?" he added significantly.

"Oh, he talks as if Ireland were under the heel of the oppressor—almost as if she were in the category with Belgium. You don't know the name of Kane, but his full name is Dennis Kane O'Rourke—you may know that——"

"The O'Rourke! Has he turned up again? Bless my heart and soul!"

Cicely, who had entirely forgotten her lunch and where she was, put a breathless question.

"You do know about him, Major Halloran?"

"I know enough. A good sort, me dear, and as clever as they make 'em; but he got in with the wrong crowd, and had his head turned when he was too young to understand. So the O'Rourke has gone to Ireland?—umph."

Somehow, that monosyllable seemed to embody a lot, and Cicely's excited interest grew. Struck by her expression, the major turned to her and said in a low voice:

"Are you interested beyond the common in this rascal, me dear?"

"Rascal! Is he a rascal, major?" and her cheeks paled.

"Only in the sense that he is a hot-headed youngster you can't help liking, in spite of his folly. In the far back days the Hallorans and the O'Rourkes had some traffic, but you can't do anything with a firebrand. Hasn't the Legion taught him better? Faith, and I'll do my best to get hold of him when I get to Dublin!"

"Oh, do!" cried Cicely fervently. "I shall be so grateful."

"Is it so bad as that?" murmured the major; and at the moment, Lady Steering, disapproving of this low-toned conversation at a common table as a distinct breach of courtesy and manners, asked a question of Major Halloran which compelled it to come to an end.

Cicely was rather silent and distrait throughout the rest of the meal, and found no opportunity of resuming the talk which had interested her so acutely. Very soon afterwards Lady Steering rose, and they had to leave the men to their smoke.

Feeling that she could not be subjected to her mother-in-law's cross-questioning at the moment, Cicely escaped out of doors, glad of the cool air, for her blood was surging in her veins, and she felt worked up to a state of extraordinary tension, which certainly measured the depth of her interest in the man she had known and learned to love as Dennis Kane.

With her customary candour Cicely had faced the facts, and no longer hid from herself that she did love Dennis Kane, and that everything concerning him was of supreme moment in her eyes. She watched feverishly for the exodus of the men from the dining-room, but it was not till the moment came for them to bid their kind hostess good-bye that Major Halloran came to her side.

"Look here, me dear. I've been thinking over what you've told me—it will take more thinking—but I've hit upon a plan."

"What is it?" asked Cicely feverishly.

"You need a holiday. Why not come across to Ireland with me? My wife will be more than pleased to see you. She's as grateful as I am for the privileges I've had in this house."

"Go to Ireland with you? But, how splendid! Do you think it could be managed?"

"Managed? Why, yes; nothing easier. You leave it to me. I won't say anything to-day, but to-morrow I'll pay a duty visit to your mother-in-law, and it'll be a queer thing if I don't get her to my way of thinking. Tell me, does she know anything about the O'Rourke?"

"Only what I told you. She knows him, but

nothing about—about me,” said Cicely, colouring sweetly.

“Right-o. Perhaps she needn’t ever know. You must be prevented making another matrimonial mistake, me dear, and the very best way to prevent it is to make the fullest inquiry about the man who is trying to persuade you to it.”

“Oh, he didn’t do much persuading. You see—you see, I sent him away, because he would not answer satisfactorily certain questions I put to him. It is war, Major Halloran, and if we have traitors in the camp, where are we?”

She threw up her little head with a fine noble gesture, which commanded the major’s whole admiration.

“If the O’Rourke can be saved from himself, me dear—and I can tell you he is worth saving—you’ll be the saviour!” he said fervently. “And he’s in luck and apparently doesn’t know it. Well, will you leave it to me? You’d like a trip to Ireland?”

“Oh, I would! Apart from him, it would interest me beyond everything!”

“Then it’ll come off,” said the major without the smallest hesitation. And it did.

CHAPTER XX

THE mail boat from Holyhead arrived in Kingstown Harbour on one of the most exquisite mornings Cicely had ever seen. She had slept well and soundly as the boat rocked on the choppy waters of the Irish Channel, and her eyes were bright, her cheeks pink, her whole

being alive, with not a hint of night travelling or fatigue about her.

The major met her, smiling, proud of his charge, not requiring to ask how she was. The seasoned traveller carries her own credentials with her.

"We made a good run. But did you hear the rain in the night?"

"No," said Cicely. "I didn't hear anything, though I wanted to keep awake dreadfully for the submarine."

The major smiled a trifle grimly.

Lady Steering had looked aghast at the suggestion of the Irish visit. It is one thing to invite a charming man to luncheon, another to entrust him with the care of an equally charming young travelling companion.

Then, as she said plaintively, they knew nothing of the people on the other side, and she was not appeased until Moira Halloran, stepping for once out of the big-hearted Irish way, sent a telegram confirming her husband's invitation, and adding her own. Even then Lady Steering was exceedingly dubious. She could not understand why Cicely should want to go to Ireland in such circumstances. Nevertheless, Cicely had her way.

"Oh, isn't Ireland lovely?" she cried, with a little sigh of perfect delight. "She's got a veil on, a mystery veil, to cover the sun! Is it always like that, major? It makes me want to cry."

The major's heart was soft, and he had often been home-sick for these lovely pensive shores.

"Aye, maybe," was all he answered at the moment, and Cicely understood.

At seven o'clock they alighted from the old cab in Lower Mount Street, where he had a little town house. The other one, the home of their hearts, nestled among the Limerick hills, which Cicely was to see one day; but not yet.

An eager face, pressed against an upper window, brightened at sight of the lumbering cab, and Moira Halloran opened the door herself. Cicely made herself busy with her slender luggage at that supreme moment, after she had caught the glory in Moira Halloran's Irish eyes. Her own were a bit soft and tender when at last she had conquered a refractory strap, and the major was standing by to help her out.

Moira, in a blue peignoir which matched her eyes, looking incredibly young and sweet, was smiling just inside the open door. And the two girls kissed one another, and the English rose was received in that happy corner of Ireland's garden and found it good. She was taken to her room, where a fire already burned cheerfully to take the nip from the cool morning air; and her little breakfast tray was ready.

"Now, you take all that and get to bed, and I'll come and fetch you when I think you've had enough sleep," said Moira.

"Oh, but how could I sleep? I'm awake, every bit of me. Besides, I want to see the baby."

"You shall see him. He's a darling duck, and he's got Pat's eyes. Well, anyway, drink your tea, and then we'll see."

With that she took herself off, and the door was closed, and Cicely knew that all the treasures of the heart were being inspected somewhere else under that happy roof. She felt singularly alone and aloof, and throwing off her hat, she approached the window and took a long survey of Dublin roofs.

There was little more to be seen from that high window, though just a peep of the green enclosure in Fitzwilliam Square could be caught, with bare boughs waving against the cloud-flecked sky. The sky seemed very low in the misty morning, though shafts of incredible glory from the risen sun relieved the gloom.

Cicely had a queer feeling of things hidden, of

something brooding and unseen; the air seemed tense, charged with electric forces, but not sinister. The girl's spirit, quick to sense and respond to such influences, was only then conscious of a deep feeling of contentment at finding herself under the low grey skies of Ireland. No doubt this was a purely personal thing, explained by her interest in the man who had awakened her heart.

It was of him she thought as she pushed the tendrils of her hair back from her white brow, and with her chin on her hand faced the window which looked out on Dublin streets. Where was he? In which section of the city? What roof covered him? It seemed a very large city. Was it likely that they would ever meet? She admitted in her heart of hearts that probably she could only count on the hundredth chance.

She turned round, plunged her face and hands into the clear cold water, and then sat down to drink her tea. The little white bed, with the shamrock-scattered counterpane, invited her to rest; but every nerve and fibre was alive and awake, and sleep was impossible.

It was all very homey and comfortable, and Cicely, who had been living the Spartan life for many months, where morning tea and other luxuries were strictly taboo, revelled in it all. She was on holiday; she had cast the trammels, broken clean away. Something told her it was going to be a final break, that henceforth her destinies were to be irrevocably bound up with the low green island dipping down into the sea.

Hearing her moving about later, Mrs. Halloran, with the new baby in her arms and a three-year-old of adorable sweetness clinging to her skirts, knocked at the door.

"Oh, you heavenly angels!" cried Cicely, and forthwith fell down in worship at a new shrine.

AN ENGLISH ROSE

Moirá looked on smilingly, touched and gratified, since there is no quicker way to a mother's heart than through her children. Moirá's heart was exceptionally warm, even for an Irish heart, and, happy herself, she was in the mood to love all the world. So she beheld Cicely's open adoration with pride and joy.

"You like children, then? I'm so glad. Because there are five in this house, and they make what Pat calls 'a thundering row.' Don't you hear them? That's him with the boys. They're only just wakened. Such sleepy-headed little chaps, but darlings every one."

"May I have the baby?" asked Cicely, with a sweet yearning in her eyes. "Am I holding him right? He won't break, will he? You see, I've never seen one so tiny at close quarters. Oh, isn't he perfectly, adorably sweet?"

She gathered the blue-eyed mite to her bosom, and the little toddling one crept nearer, sure of her welcome, as the child is when she discerns love in eyes not seen before.

It was a very pretty picture, of which Cicely was quite unconscious. Presently she looked up into Moirá Halloran's face with wonder in her own.

"What a lot of things there are in life—lovely and incredible things! One meets new ones every day. Oh, I am so glad I came! And how lovely it was of you to have me! Now I come to think of it, it was rather an adventure. My mother-in-law wasn't sure, even, if it was quite proper!"

Moirá laughed.

"Pat has been telling me. But you have been so kind to him in England, and I'm so glad. We need to understand one another better. And I do believe you've been sent to me to help. My nurse went home for the week-end to Waterford last Friday, and she

has never come back, and there isn't another, to be had for love or money."

"Oh, I'll be the nurse! I should love it. Only, of course, you'll have to supervise, or I'll do wrong things."

"There isn't much fear of that. We'll do them together. I'm not an experienced mother yet, though I've had five. No, there are no more nurses to be had. So many of our girls have gone to England to make munitions, and more are going. I'm rather glad the major has come. We're expecting trouble in Dublin, and though I'm not nervous, there are the children."

"What kind of trouble?" asked Cicely anxiously. "Do you mean the rebellion people are always talking about, but which nobody really expects?"

"The Sinn Feiners," answered Moira, as if that summed up everything. Cicely had heard the name, but it conveyed no meaning to her.

"What are they?"

Moira shrugged her shoulders.

"It isn't safe to give them their true name; but, anyway, they're agin the Government. Pat wants us to get away down to Ballysinane; but it's a long journey with so many babies, and, besides, you don't want to be buried in the country. There is Dublin to see, and what's going on in it."

There was a good deal more going on in it at that moment than even the slightly initiated dreamed.

Cicely quickly settled into that delightful household, finding her niche in it, succumbing to the spell of the lovable, wayward Irish nature without a moment's delay. It provided a sharp contrast to the environment she had left, where convention, tradition, laboured courtesy ruled. Perhaps nothing appealed more to Cicely's very unconventional nature than the casual, happy-go-lucky atmosphere prevailing in the

Halloran household. It was not a makeshift atmosphere, covering incompetence and discomfort, as is so often the case. Moira was an excellent wife and mother, who gave her best to what she called her job. It was rather a free and candid air, an entire absence of pomp and ceremony, and an open-handed hospitality which Cicely had never seen excelled. The major seemed to have troops of friends, whom he brought in at all sorts of unconventional hours, expecting meals and, what was more amazing, getting them.

"This house is the most elastic I've ever seen in the world," said Cicely breathlessly on the third morning of her arrival, when she came down to find the breakfast table augmented by two new faces. "And, for goodness' sake, how many brothers have you, Major Halloran?"

"Oh, these aren't brothers exactly, me dear," said the major, with his big laugh. "They're just the boys. Ask Moira. They come just the same when I'm not here."

In the course of conversation it transpired that two more might be expected to lunch, and as Moira had a good many housekeeping affairs to see to, and as yet the nurse's post was unfilled, and the other maids had no time to spare to take out the babies, Cicely volunteered to give the children their morning outing.

"Oh, let me! I'll be ever so careful," she pleaded.

"Lady Steering nursemaid! Wheeling an Irish major's offspring in a pram! Your mother-in-law would expect the heavens to fall at the spectacle."

"Oh, they won't fall. Besides, it's a lot easier than driving a haycart or chopping up the mangolds. And even if it were twice as hard, I'd do it and love doing it. So there!"

She had her way, and the new nursemaid, in her

well-cut black coat and skirt and small hat from which she carefully removed the flowing veil, emerged triumphant from the house and headed towards the open square.

All the men had gone off immediately after breakfast, and Cicely once more felt the odd sense of something impending, some crisis approaching, in which she was to have her share.

She had a gift for locality and direction, and seldom made a mistake. The wide, beautiful square, in which many of the Irish aristocracy still held town houses, though very few of them could afford to live in them, was very quiet at that hour, and Cicely made her way right through it, enjoying pushing the perambulator, and eager to do some small shopping errands for Mrs. Halloran, who was to be busy making pastry as a stand-by for any extra meals that might be required that day or the next.

The major had talked at breakfast about trying to borrow or hire a car to take them all to Ballysinane, but the events of that exciting day were to put everything else out of their minds.

By the time Cicely reached the more frequented streets she became aware that there seemed to be some considerable excitement abroad. People were either hurrying hither and thither with a scared look on their faces, or standing about in little groups discussing something unusual. By the time she reached Sackville Street crowds were visible, and there seemed to be considerable uproar, as if a procession of some kind or a regimental demonstration were in progress and being impeded by the crowd. Then quite suddenly a shot rang out, followed by another and another.

Cicely, without fear for herself, but only concerned for the two children in her care, quickly turned the perambulator and began to return as fast as her legs could carry her back to Lower Mount Street. Half-

way across Fitzwilliam Square she met Moira Halloran, running bareheaded, searching for her darlings.

"Pat sent that silly boy, Terry O'Neil, back to tell us the Sinn Feiners have risen, and that we are to keep indoors till he gets back. Oh, I am so thankful to see you, Cicely! Do you think we could run any faster?"

"No," said Cicely decidedly. "And don't you touch the pram. You are simply shaking all over; you will upset it. I've been down to Sackville Street, and there are awful things happening there."

"I should think so! Don't you hear the shots? They sound like machine-guns. Pat told me last night, Cicely, that there are hundreds of German machine-guns concealed in places along the coast, and that they are being secretly brought to the towns. You are sure they aren't coming this way?" she added, casting a fearful glance behind.

"Quite sure. And, anyway, we are just at home. You seem awfully frightened, Mrs Halloran. Do you really think, or does the major think, it can amount to anything?"

"He doesn't like what he has heard at the club and other places since he arrived. I wish he had come back himself instead of sending Terry. You know what he is. He will be in the thick of everything; and I told him it would be very ignominious to be killed in the streets of Dublin. Besides, I want him alive."

Cicely laughed at that, for Moira said it so quaintly, and looked so sweet and young as she picked up the sleeping infant from the perambulator and ran up the steps with it, leaving Cicely to retrieve the two-year-old and ring the area bell for the maid to come and take in the baby-carriage.

Moira, whose mind and thoughts were now entirely engrossed by fears for her husband's safety, went right up to the nursery with the children, and left Cicely in the dining-room. The windows were both open, so that

the rattle of the guns only a few streets away sounded quite clearly.

Cicely felt her excitement rising, and, urged by some blind impulse for which she could not account, she presently picked up her gloves again, took a stick from the hall-stand, and marched forth on a voyage of discovery.

"If that Terry boy had only been in we could have gone together. He knows the geography of Dublin. But, anyhow, I must see what is going on," she murmured to herself.

But deeper far than mere curiosity regarding one of the most amazing side-issues of the war was a kind of prevision, almost a certainty, that in some strange way it was going to affect her personally.

She knew that it could only do so through Dennis Kane. (She could never call him The O'Rourke; he was likely to be Dennis Kane to her to the end of the chapter). And she felt assured, by some inner consciousness which had no facts to support it, that she had come to Ireland to meet him. Equally certain did she feel that she was going forth now on some high adventure, and so fearful was she of being kept back by Moira Halloran that she closed the door very softly and simply ran across the street, keeping on the inside of the square, so that she could not be seen even from the upper windows.

She could hear perfectly that curious hum which distance gives to the uproar made by a hostile crowd. It was punctuated by the short, sharp bark of rifle and machine-gun fire. Cicely ran, not knowing why she ran, only sure that she must be in the thick of things.

When she reached Sackville Street she was thrilled and partly horrified to see that the work of destruction had begun. It reminded her of a little French town she had seen in process of being shelled and demolished by the Germans. She met refugees, less courageous

thán herself, running in all directions, not slow to warn her against going forward; but upheld and driven by some inward purpose, she held on until she found herself in the very thick of the fight.

It was an extraordinary scene, a deplorable comment on the internal affairs of a great Empire to see such fierce conflict between its units. The rebels were in possession of many points of vantage, and were firing recklessly yet with deadly precision from every window, and from behind the rough, hastily improvised barricades that had been thrown up across the street.

Then suddenly Cicely knew that she had to help, for there were wounded and bleeding people on the pavements and on the rough causeway. She forgot everything but the ministry of healing and succour she had learned under the Red Cross flag. There were other strange flags blowing in the wind of that blustering April morning, which stood for a misguided love of country and were really treachery against the law and order which are the only foundations for a people's good.

Cicely was not the only woman, for there were many others, wild-eyed and desperate at heart, supporting the rebel columns, while some were, like her, bent on errands of mercy.

Fires had already started, and the sweet air was hot with smoke and flame; and the rattle of the guns went on, mingled with hoarse cries and curses, which brought back to the girl's mind all the stories she had read of the surging crowds before the barricades of Paris. The days of the Terror, and later of the Commune, had interested her deeply, and while at Neuilly she had explored every bit of old Paris, and had been able, with her quick imagination, to conjure up wild, stirring pictures of the past.

They surely had their parallel here. While she

bent to her task of unloosing collars and neckclothes, and staunching blood from wounds with whatever material she could find, even calmly removing her white muslin underskirt for the purpose, she felt the thrill of it all, and wondered whether Ireland would really march through this blood and terror to the peace and liberty of which she had so passionately dreamed.

People spoke to her whom she had never seen before, thanked her, even, for what she was doing; but none interfered, nor yet bade her begone. She had no consciousness of the lapse of time, but moved swiftly to and fro in the surge of the street where the battle was thickest; and then quite suddenly she made pause, for across the gutter, with a bullet wound in his chest, from which the blood poured freely, lay the man she had come to Ireland to see!

"Thank God! Now I know," she whispered as she bent over him. But what it was she knew she did not say.

Over her arm hung the remnant of her white underskirt, from which the frills had already been torn to staunch the blood of Irish patriots and their innocent victims; and tearing a strip from it, she bent to her task of staunching the life-blood of the man she loved.

What he was doing there, whether fighting with or against the rebels, whether he was a Sinn Féiner in actual deed or merely a looker-on, she did not know. To her that mattered not at all—she knew. As she bent over him, calling up every atom of the knowledge she possessed, the noise of battle and the shrill cries of people carried away by the lust and passion of the moment were all swept away, and nothing remained but one stupendous fact.

She realised, too, that hers was the deathless love which, understanding all, forgives all, and she was lifted by it clean above the awful and momentous issue

of the hour, beyond all personal or party feeling, into a clearer region where love and sorrow and sacrifice reigned supreme.

Then there whizzed through the air another bullet, which found its mark in the slight woman's figure bending low in her work of necessity and mercy. And Cicely remembered no more.

CHAPTER XXI

WHEN she awoke it was night and the lights were low.

The red glow of firelight was in the place where she lay, but the window opposite was open, and a flood of moonlight shone, white and exquisite, across the floor. It was quite a bare floor, and before the fire stood a basket-chair, in which sat a nurse asleep over the pages of an open book.

"I'm in hospital," said Cicely to herself, and sank back very noiselessly to gather her scattered senses.

She was conscious of no pain, but only a stiffness of the left shoulder, which was presently explained when her hand wandered to it and found a surgical bandage. Then all came back, and she moved so quickly and restlessly that the nurse sprang up, convicted of being asleep on duty. But she had had no respite for eighteen hours and was worn out.

Her kind hand touched the patient's forehead, and her eyes were both smiling and tender.

"Well, how is it?" she asked. "Have you any pain?"

Cicely shook her head, essayed to speak, and was surprised to find her voice a whisper.

"Where am I?"

"In hospital."

"I can see that. But when and how did I get here?"

"You're in a private hospital—Mr. Moynahan's."

"Did they fetch me here off the street? What happened? Was I shot? I don't seem to remember."

"You had a bullet; but it is not serious—a flesh wound in the shoulder. But it was very jagged and had to be stitched up. You had a good deal of anæsthetic—you took it rather well—and have been asleep a long time."

"Have I? But how is it I don't remember in between? Who brought me here?"

"Mr. Moynahan, in his car."

"I see. And do they know at Lower Mount Street where I am and what has happened?"

The nurse shook her head.

"Nobody knows anything—not even your name. What is it?"

"My name? Oh, that doesn't matter. Send to Lower Mount Street I'm staying at Major Halloran's house. I came from England only three days ago."

"Better have stopped there, I should think," said the nurse, who was Scotch and spoke with a strong Aberdeen accent, which sounded not harshly but sweetly to Cicely's ears, for it conveyed a sense of strength and kindness and steadfastness comforting to a weak body. "Now you mustn't talk any more, or I'll go and fetch Sister."

"Oh, but I must talk! Can you send to the Hallorans to tell them where I am? They must think I'm killed, or something equally dreadful."

"In the morning. It's only two o'clock now. I'll ring them up, if they have a telephone, before I go off duty."

"They haven't a telephone."

"Then I'll go myself. Now you must drink this and sleep again. Sleep's the thing. I never get enough. It's the only thing that reconciles one to the long last sleep—it'll be satisfying."

"Oh, but, Nurse——"

"Well, what is it now? You haven't a temperature, I can see, or it would be as much as my post is worth to let you go on talking. I've seen temperatures rise before now because no answer could be got to questions."

"So have I. I'm a sort of a nurse myself," said Cicely. "Tell me, were any more patients brought here, excepting me?"

"No. Mr. Moynahan himself was passing by, or trying to pass, in his motor, and he brought you."

"I was looking after a wounded man," said Cicely, flushing slightly. "Do you know what became of him?"

"No; but the ambulance would take him in due course. I guess he's in one of the big hospitals. They're full everywhere, and beds in the corridors. Ghastly business, sure enough, and what they want Heaven alone knows. You should see Dublin now. It looks as if it might be in German occupation. Now do go to sleep."

Cicely closed her eyes. She had learned all she wished to know, and must now ponder on the situation. Presently, not yet free from the power of the drug, she drifted once more into the land of dreams and visions, and when she finally awoke the sun had taken the moon's place, and was shining serenely on a newly devastated world, which gave ocular demonstration of the incredible folly and shortsightedness of men, and of the havoc that can be wrought by passions out of control.

A fresh nurse bent over Cicely this time, and she looked round restlessly for the kind Scotch face.

"Where is the other nurse?" she asked, disappointed.

"Nurse Macdonald? She's off duty."

"Do you know whether she has gone to Major Halloran's house in Lower Mount Street?"

"Yes, she has. Here is Mr. Moynahan coming. He's been here twice this morning, but I wouldn't have you wakened."

Cicely had very small interest in the great surgeon, though she summoned a smile in answer to his greeting.

He was a very tall, lean person, with the keenest eyes and mouth Cicely had ever seen in her life. But she had no fear of man, and had long since discovered that even very great surgeons are only men.

"Well," he said, "have you had enough of the Sinn Feiners?"

"I wasn't thinking about them. Please, can I get up?"

"Some day, please God," he answered lightly. "How's the shoulder?"

"Stiff, but not sore. Oh, please don't take it down. Couldn't I go home—back to where I'm living, and get well there?"

"Are we so bad to you here?" he asked. "Some would be glad to come in and ask no questions."

"Really sick folks, of course. But I'm feeling quite well in my body, only my mind isn't easy."

"It'll get easier before we're done with you," he answered pleasantly, and, sitting down on the side of the bed near the foot, he looked at her as if he found the vision pleasant.

"Now, young lady, what were you doing roaming about Sackville Street in the thick of it, eh?"

"I was just roaming, that's all."

"Natural curiosity of woman, eh?"

"Yes—Eve on the prowl."

"And were you satisfied with what you saw?"

You'll be getting a V.C. You helped such a lot of folk. Are you a nurse by profession?"

"One of the makeshift ones. I was in a hospital under the French Red Cross at Fouches."

"And what wind blew you across to us?"

"I came on a visit to the Hallorans. Do you know them?"

"Yes. I was at school with Pat Halloran. Now perhaps we'll get at your name?"

"My name? Oh, Cicely Steering."

"Miss, I suppose."

"No."

"Mrs., then," he said in surprise.

"Lady Steering," answered Cicely unwillingly. "Please, how many more questions?"

"That'll do. And I'll motor round to the Hallorans, soon as I am done here, and relieve their anxiety."

"May I ask a question now?"

"Yes, one or two."

"What happened to the poor people who were hurt in the streets?"

"Same as happened to you. They were all housed in the hospitals last night. They're choke full, and private houses have had to be commandeered."

"I suppose nobody knew what happened to the man I was seeing to?"

Mr. Moynahan shook his head.

"He was only *one* in the crowd."

"Yes; but I know him, and I want somebody to find out about him for me."

"I see. What was his name? English, Scotch or Irish? All sorts were in the *mêlée*."

"Irish. His name is Dennis Kane O'Rourke."

"The O'Rourke! Heavens, was he in it?" exclaimed Moynahan. "Where and how did you get to *know him*, dear lady?"

"In France. I met him here by accident. At least, I didn't *meet* him. I only saw him as he lay after he was shot. I was trying to help him when my bullet came."

"Probably saved his life. What I can't make out is how I missed him. I know O'Rourke, though he disappeared from Irish life a few years ago. I'll have some inquiries made; but it will take some time. Here comes some visitor. Too early for visitors," he said with a pretended frown, as Moira Halloran appeared on the threshold.

"Good morning, Mr. Moynahan. Dear child, to think you should be lying here!" she said, darting forward to kiss Cicely. "What a night of horror and anxiety we have had, until your kind nurse brought us information about you. You look wonderfully well on the whole. She isn't seriously hurt, I hope, Mr. Moynahan?"

"Oh, no; she's going to survive. How's Pat?"

"Pat is quite well."

"Is he only on leave, or has he been sent to take over the defence of Dublin?"

"Only on leave. Can I take Lady Steering home with me now?"

"You can *not*, dear lady," said the surgeon briefly. "What is the matter with my quarters? A good many quite nice people have found them comfortable."

"Oh, it isn't that, but she's our guest, and we are responsible for her."

"How did you allow her loose in the streets yesterday, then?" he asked bluntly.

"You'd better answer that, Cicely. It's the question we've all been asking ourselves. What did you do it for?"

"I wanted to see what was going on."

"And she got her reward—she saw the worst of

it. 'Have you been down in the city, Mrs. Halloran? It's pretty bad.'

"Not yet. I don't want to go, either. Do you think the worst is over, Mr. Moynahan?"

"Faith, and if I could tell you that I would be worth something. I don't like the look of things yet. Well, I must be off, for I've got forty-eight hours' work to do in twenty-four. And I was only two hours on the sofa last night. She'll be quite all right. Yes, you may talk a little, provided you don't over-tire her. Perhaps we may let her back to Lower Mount Street on Sunday. Tell Pat to come round and smoke a pipe with me to-night, about half-past ten. If I find I have to be out I'll let him know."

"We haven't got a telephone, remember, but he'll come on chance," said Moira, and then drew up the basket-chair to the side of Cicely's bed and looked at her very steadily.

"Do you know that you are a very naughty young woman, and I'm not forgiving you yet? You had Pat and me nearly frantic. Don't you think it was a foolish thing to do? You might so easily have been killed."

"I didn't think of that. Don't be angry, dear Mrs. Halloran. It doesn't suit you one little bit. It just had to be. That is why I came to Dublin. There's more in it than I can tell you, and the end hasn't come yet. I keep on being frightfully sleepy, but I do want to see the major. Do you think he could come and see me to-day?"

"Sure, now Moynahan says you aren't seriously injured and hasn't forbidden you to talk. I'll send him round after lunch. Of course, he's down in the thick of things this morning. They're still holding out in houses, with machine-guns and rifles. It isn't over yet, dear," she added with a shiver. "I do wish were were all safe at Ballysinane."

Cicely could not honestly share that fervent wish, though she understood the mother's anxiety about her little brood. True to her promise, Moira sent the major round after lunch, and Cicely was very wide awake indeed when he came into the room.

"I'm quite all right, and please don't shy horrid things at me. They've all said them, so you must prove the solitary exception to the rule," she said, with her most adorable smile. "Major, I wanted to see you dreadfully, to tell you something."

"Yes? What's that?"

"I saw Mr. O'Rourke on Sackville Street. In fact, I came on him lying on the pavement bleeding from a wound. I was rendering first aid to him with—with part of my white underskirt for a bandage," she added, with a qucer, choking little laugh, "when another bullet found me."

"Bless my heart and soul! He was lying outside! That means that he wasn't fighting for them inside. The beggars had machine-guns at the windows and snipers everywhere."

"I know. It was just like the French front. No, I think he could only have been a spectator, like me. I hope he was, Major. Will you do something for me?"

"Done, if possible."

"Go and find him. He must be in one of the hospitals. I can't rest till I know what has become of him. And I want to find out two things—whether he is alive and seriously hurt, and whether he was on the Sinn Feiners' side."

The major shook his head.

"I'm afraid from what I know of him, my dear, that he *will* be on their side."

"Then I hope he's dead," said Cicely, and turned her face to the wall.

Pat Halloran went out to ponder on that utterance,

and to reflect on the combined luck and folly of Dennis O'Rourke to have aroused the interest of a peerless creature like Cicely, and to permit even the wrongs of his country to endanger his chance of winning her.

Mr. Moynahan found his patient not so well later in the day, and forbade visitors till further permission. She made no protest, but lay quietly, mostly with her eyes closed, her splendid vitality seeming to have suffered a serious check.

Even telegrams from England of anxious inquiry and solicitude failed to rouse her to more than a passing interest.

"Send two telegrams, please, Nurse Macdonald," was all she said. "One to Marsham, Streatham Hill, and one to Lady Steering, Deverills, Much Havers, Herts; and say I am getting on all right and will be home as soon as they allow me to travel."

Sunday afternoon the major arrived at the nursing home and was allowed to interview Cicely.

"Well," she said, looking up at him more brightly than usual. "Any luck?"

"Yes, me dear. I've found the broth av a bhoy," he answered jovially, "looking an interesting hero, as if he had come back from the Front. The bandage on his head suits him down to the ground, and all the nurses are in love with him."

"Can he talk, and does he understand anything?" she asked, with a touch of severity which had no effect whatever on Pat Halloran.

"Faith, and that's a poser, and no mistake! The trouble with The O'Rourke is that he's always been after understanding a lot more than was good for him. His digestion couldn't stand it; but I've given him a good talking to, and I think he's going to be all right."

"And did you tell him about me?" asked Cicely, and the faint pink began to creep up over her pale face and a partial glory to her speaking eyes.

"No, me dear. That's your very own job."

"He doesn't know I—I was there with him in the street?"

"No, me dear; and as for the torn petticoat, wild horses wouldn't drag it from me. But I did ask the nurse, a little colleen from the Curragh Hospital, whether she had kept the bandage they took off, and when she said she hadn't, I said she'd destroyed what the Bank of Ireland would not have enough gold inside of it to pay for."

"Oh, Major Halloran, you're an awful tease, and I wonder that Moira puts up with you. What do they say of him at the hospital? Will he get well?"

"What do you want me to say, me dear? For last time I was here you hoped the poor boy would die, and that's the truth."

"Don't be silly, but answer my question," was all Cicely said.

"Oh, he'll get better right enough, though there'll be something wanting to finish the cure not to be found in that big barn of a place. So get you up, me dear, for your job in this distressful country isn't finished yet."

CHAPTER XXII

"It's a dream of heavenly beauty, and how you ever live in Lower Mount Street, Dublin City, when you have such a place to come to, I can't think!" said Cicely, as she stood with Moira Halloran on the terrace in front of Ballysinane and looked across the sweep of misty hills and lakes and woods which sloped towards the sea.

"It's very pretty," Moira admitted. "But five miles from a station, my dear, when you are too poor to keep horses or motors, and a long railway journey before and behind to a man that gets only four days' leave once in a blue moon, that explains Lower Mount Street, Cicely."

"Yes, of course; but it's a lovely dream, all the same, and I'm beginning to understand something about the Irish now. There's a witchery, an enchantment, something in the air of Ireland that makes you feel different about every mortal thing."

Moira smiled and turned her head away as if she feared her smile might be questioned. For Cicely's eyes were misty like the Irish skies, and there was a quivering sweetness about her mouth which bespoke something tugging at the heart-strings.

"I'd love to stop here indefinitely, Moira. But I must get away back to my mangolds and my cows, or I shall be permanently disabled," she said quaintly. "I feel the early symptoms already. For instance, I don't want to get up in the mornings, and when I am up I only lounge about and look at beauty spots. The war isn't over, either, but getting worse every day."

"It's going to be over this autumn, some think; and, anyway, it can't be more pressing than it was, for Pat has got extension of his leave for four days."

"Oh, how glad I am! Is that why he looks so excited this morning? And why wouldn't he take me driving to the station? I haven't forgiven him yet."

"Well, he had a lot to do, and, I rather think, promised to give somebody who hasn't even one horse to his name a lift from the mail train."

"What does he think about the Sinn Feiners now, Moira?"

"Oh, only that they're suppressed for the moment. The whole country is seething with their restlessness.

I don't mean that all Ireland is Sinn Fein, Cicely—God forbid!—but a noisy minority can shove a good-living majority into the background for quite a while. I just go on hoping it will sort itself out; but Ireland has always been like it, and always will be. I don't see much good in trying to change it."

"Oh, but what a hopeless doctrine! And the people are such dears. There have been mistakes made, Moira—the very kind of mistakes Germany made about us. Our politicians have neglected the study of Irish psychology."

"Have they?" asked Moira innocently, watching the gambols of the three-year-old on the neglected tennis lawn, among some tame rabbits and an agitated and barking puppy. "It sounds a long word, and I don't just know what it means. Look here, Cicely! Now the mist has lifted, do you catch that gleam of water across the valley, just at the bottom of the big hill? Slieve Oyne, that is."

"Yes, of course."

"Well, just beyond that, do you see a white house against the firs?"

"I think I see it."

"Well, if you think Ballysinane pretty, you ought to see Mullamore. It's a perfect and unforgettable dream."

"Whose is it?"

"It belongs to an absentee landlord, as so many of poor Ireland's best places do."

"Why is he an absentee?" Cicely asked; but Moira merely shook her head and murmured, "Ask me another."

"If they'd stop half of their silly legislation at Westminster, and pass a new law to make Irish landlords live on their estates and look after their own people, and spend their money in the country, it would help, wouldn't it, Moira?"

"It would. But even then there wouldn't be enough of money to build up all the walls and repair the fences and hang the gates straight."

Cicely sighed.

"Four days' extra leave, the major has got? That will be next Tuesday. Did you say Mr. Moynahan was coming down over the week-end? Do you think it likely he'll let me go back with the major?"

"I think it unlikely, my dear, as I shall forbid him even to think of it."

"Oh, but, Moira, I must. I don't in the least know how they are getting on over there. Do you think any more letters will ever come to Ireland?"

"Maybe; and, anyway, it won't matter.' Though I couldn't live without Pat's. If we could be cut off clean for a while, it might be the making of us. But, seriously, Cicely, you will stop here for a month at least? What will the children and I do without you? And I want you to get to know what the politicians call rural Ireland. It's delightful. And then you can go home and write a book on 'How Ireland can be Saved.'"

Cicely put her hand over the laughing mouth.

"Moira, you little—— - No, I won't say it."

"I don't mind if you do. But Pat says you could write a book. He thinks you're a genius."

Cicely affected horror.

"There is nothing on earth I want less to be. Do I look like a genius, Moira Halloran?"

"Well, to be candid, you don't. Your clothes don't fit the part, to say nothing of your face."

They laughed together at that, and Cicely made a sudden bound to the lawn, where the children played, Moira looking after her with a tender, rather motherly smile on her lips. When she heard the rumble of the dogcart wheels a little later, she went round to the stableyard to meet it.

"Well, did he come, Pat?" she asked breathlessly.

"He did, me dear. He's safe at Mullamore."

"And did you invite us all over on Sunday?"

"I did; and he'll be ready."

"Pat, you never gave the show away, did you? He doesn't know she's here, does he?"

The major shook a very emphatic head.

"Devil a bit! That would be finishing the job properly in the wrong way. You never know, with that sort; they run away from things other men would give their ears for."

"And what did he say about things in general?"

"Oh, he's coming over to Collisey as soon as he's fit."

Moirá clapped her hands, then suddenly became thoughtful.

"I'm not being sure, Pat, whether we shouldn't have waited and let her see him first in uniform."

"We can't afford to wait with her sort, me dear. No, nor Dennis can't. The business must be clinched in Ireland, or it'll be off, you can take it from me, darling."

"Oh, she's such a dear, and I hope he's good enough!" cried Moirá impulsively.

"None of us is good enough," said the major, with a sober note in his voice. "But he's going to be. She'll lift him clean up."

Moirá agreed. Yet, as her sweet eyes wandered to the white front of Mullamore, now showing with startling clearness against the vivid green of the budding trees, her eyes were misty too, and she felt that strange hush of the spirit which deep feeling brings when it can find no expression.

The days glided by sweetly in that peaceful spot, and late on Saturday night Mr. Moynahan, the surgeon, arrived to spend his quiet Sunday with his old friends.

* At forty he was still a bachelor, and it was easy to see that it was not altogether the old friends that had acted as the magnet drawing him to Ballysinane from distracting duties in Dublin. His deep eyes followed Cicely about, and his inquiries about her health had more solicitude in them than is usual even from a really interested doctor to a favourite patient.

Cicely, as usual, was quite unconscious of it. She had neither vanity nor coquetry about her, though she was always ready for a quip or a jest. It never occurred to her that the great surgeon might have succumbed to the magic of her bright eyes; and the Hallorans, with their own tremendous secret in the background, were far too wise to hint at it.

Sunday morning they drove to a little church in the valley six miles away, where Cicely was glad to be able to return thanks for her escape; and after lunch the big drag, with four horses which the major had collected up from various sources, was ready to take them out again.

"Surely we are getting plenty of fresh air!" said Cicely demurely, looking up into Mr. Moynahan's face. "Where are we going to now?"

Moirá pointed to the white house, gleaming like a gem in its setting of green against the silver of the lake.

"We're asked to tea by the absentee," she answered. "He came home unexpectedly on Thursday, and Pat has seen him since."

Cicely asked no more questions, but was ready, as always, to enjoy whatever came along. She was ready, too, to point out all the entrancing beauties of the district to Mr. Moynahan, who sat on the back seat of the drag with her.

When they were about two miles from their destination the major suddenly drew up the team and spoke over his shoulder to Cicely :

"I'd like you to come on the box-seat, Cicely. I want to talk to you now."

"All right," said Cicely; and before Moynahan could help her she had swung herself to the ground. The transfer was quickly and laughingly made, and immediately Moira, as if determined on it, engaged the surgeon in most engrossing conversation, leaving the major a chance to say what he wished without being overheard.

"Cicely, I'm not sure whether we oughtn't to have told you sooner. It's the O'Rourke's place we're heading for."

"Oh, how interesting!" said Cicely, but her voice was cold as ice.

"And, worse than that, he's there to meet us."

"Then I'll get down, if you please," said Cicely, and her face paled in the soft sunlight, also her eyes hardened. "It was unfair, major, and I should never have expected you to do it."

"You are not getting down here, me dear," said the major, quietly but very firmly.

"Oh yes, I am. There's a little cottage over there in the middle of that bog. I'll make love to the owner of it and get her to give me a cup of tea, and you can pick me up as you go by."

The major merely tightened his hand on the reins.

"Listen to me, me dear. Dennis knows you are coming."

"He knows I'm coming! Then you hadn't the right to do that, major, and if you don't stop immediately I'll jump off without."

"Faith, and you're fit enough, you firebrand! But it won't come off this time. You've got to be very, very kind to The O'Rourke, Cicely; and there's a power of things at Mullamore he'll be the better of your advice about."

Cicely answered not, but turned away a pink, rebellious cheek, and there was storm in her eyes.

"There isn't much time to lose, either, with the advice, unless you stop behind to see it carried out. You see, he's going back to Collisey with me."

"What for?" came short and sharp from the girl's lips.

"Can't you guess what for? If you can't you don't deserve to be told. Oh, thim cattle!" he said, relapsing into the deepest brogue, as he often did when moved. "Whoever has the handling av thim deserves to be strung from the nearest gallows-tree! Now, look at this gateway! A shame and disgrace, isn't it? and needing the hand of a mistress to make it straight."

The gateway, a beautiful specimen of Florentine wrought-iron work, brought overseas when Mullamore was in its full glory, hung loosely on its hinges, broken in part, the stone balustrade supporting it crumbling as if some hidden blight consumed it.

Cicely never spoke. Something gripped her heart as they swept up the long avenue, where the sap was rising in the boughs and all nature crooning of the coming summer. All the windows of the old house were open to the sun, and before the old battlemented door stood its lord and master, with his bandages still on, thinner than ever, but otherwise unchanged.

He shook hands with them all, coming last of all to Cicely, to whom he did not speak at all, nor she to him. There are moments when words are either unnecessary or superfluous; this was one.

His chance came after the tea they had—a great, generous Irish meal, set out on a wonderfully carved table in the raftered hall, where the fragrant logs spluttered forth a true Irish welcome from the wide stone fireplace.

Cicely had very little to say as the meal progressed;

but there was plenty of chatter, and The O'Rourke did well the honours of his house. After tea they sorted themselves out, and in the sunk garden, relic of some dead and gone lady of Mullamore, Dennis and Cicely found themselves alone.

"The dream has come true," he said simply, "and you've come to stop."

"Have I?" asked Cicely innocently. "And shall I be picking you up in Dublin streets again and binding you up with my petticoat lace?"

Her glance was saucy, though her lips trembled, and her colour rose.

"Did you see me in Dublin streets? Were you the woman they told me of, who saved my life?"

She nodded.

"Well, then, what are you going to do with the life you've saved?" he asked.

"What are you going to do with the life I have saved?" she retorted, quick as lightning.

"I'm going to England—to Collisey—with Pat. Hasn't he told you?"

Cicely did not answer aye or no.

"A commission?" she asked instead.

"No fear. I'll fight my way up."

"But why Collisey? Better the Irish Guards, or some other Irish regiment. You've a pace to set, don't you see, in your own country?"

"If it is your command it will be obeyed," he answered.

Then a silence fell upon them, and the quaint old-world charm of the garden encompassed them, and the spell of Ireland deepened in Cicely's heart, and she knew that she had come home.

"You like the place, my darling?" he asked anxiously. "I shall see it for ever now through your eyes."

"I like the place," she answered, and her eyes

swam in delicious tears. "And when the war is over, and we're both done doing our bit for the Empire, we'll come back and do our bit for our own corner of it. Moira says the absentee is the curse of Ireland. We'll not be absentees, Dennis."

"God speed the day!" said The O'Rourke, as he took her to his heart.



REFERENCE

